

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS



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THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

BY WARWICK DEEPING



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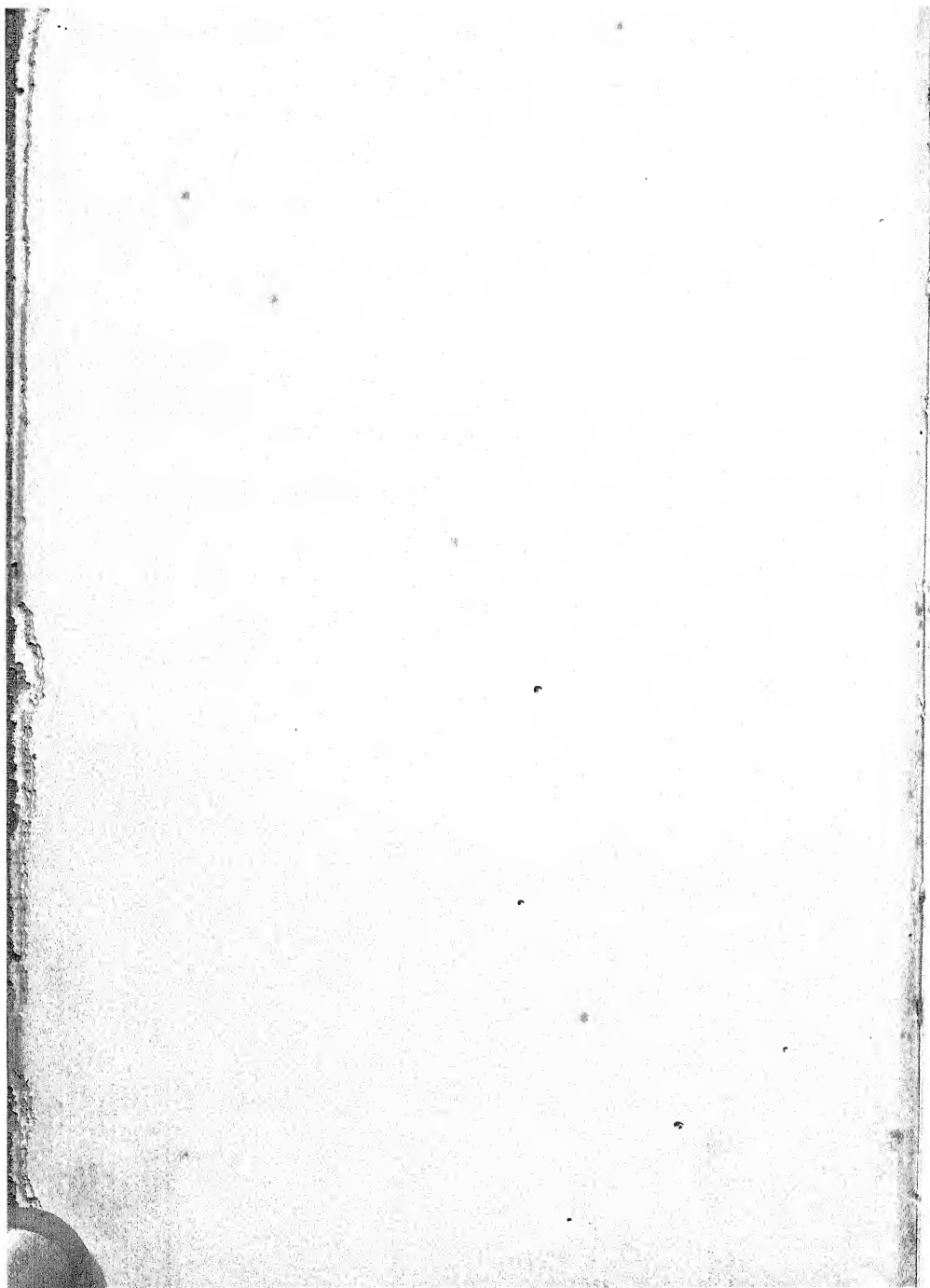
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THE TEN COMMANDMENTS



Chapter One

I

BONTHORN closed the gate.

It was a little white gate set deep in the dark recess of a very old holly hedge, and the opening in which it swung was like a tunnel cut through a city wall. Bonthorn paused in the shadow, and with his back to the gate looked at something which appeared to please him. His one very deep-blue eye filled with the light of a smile.

He saw a big cherry tree in bloom and under it a carpet of vivid grass, and on the grass Rollo, his brown Cairn, playing with a small black kitten. They were beautiful to watch on that beautiful day in May, and to Nicholas Bonthorn the secret of life was beauty. The soul of The Unknown Artist was the soul of his God.

II

Martha came out of the green porch carrying the wickerwork table pressed against her stout bust. She was one of those solid women who seem to absorb comfort and satisfaction from the inevitableness of habit. Her black eyebrows were as decisive as her mouth. If Mr. Bonthorn chose to be an oddity, she accepted his oddness because it had a reasonable and sweet quality. She allowed him genius of a sort, which was infinite and sympathetic condescension. She allowed him tea in the garden on Sunday when the weather was as reasonable as her workaday soul. She would have allowed him anything that a sensible woman of five and fifty can allow a man who can sprawl on the grass like a boy.

For Mr. Bonthorn was lying flat on his chest playing with those two young animals. That was the sort of game that was pleasant to watch, the six-foot man with his intense, brown face, and one very blue eye balanced by the black patch over the

other socket, rolling those two furry little creatures over and over on the grass. Mrs. Martha might wonder about things, but she did not ask bathetic questions. She may have wondered why the ex-soldier had never mounted a glass eye, but she had never asked him for reasons. He was sufficiently himself to satisfy her.

Martha laid the table under the cherry tree. The kitten, in a sudden access of energy and joy, shot up the trunk of the tree with hair erect and all claws spread. The dog, as though comprehending that joyous, furry fury, stood bearded and with ears erect, barking applause. Mr. Bonthorn took his floppy old hat off and threw it to the dog. Rollo commenced a furious conflict with the hat.

Martha regarded them with beneficence.

"You'll spoil that dog, sir."

The one blue eye rallied her.

"Never do it yourself, do you, Martha? What about that sacred garment you let him whisk off into the currant bushes?"

"That was what—in a manner of speaking—might be called an act of God, sir."

"Or an act of dog. I bet you sat up mending it."

"But hats, Mr. Bonthorn. It's the only decent one——"

"True. Here—you young devil, deliver up that hat."

To Bonthorn, tea out of doors somehow retained the spell of adventure, especially with the bees busy in the cherry blossom and the black kitten lapping milk. Martha gave him buttered scones and home-made cake.

"None of your grocer's stuff, sir."

And she would tell him how those Buck women who gave teas to the motoring crowd down at the old Mill House on the Lignor road would sometimes be left with pounds of stale cake spotted with sickly cherries. "Trifle for a whole week, sir, that's to say if you can call a yellow mess of grocer's cake and custard powder anything but a trifle."

Yes, even Martha's cake and her bread and butter had a spell.

England in May on a day when the bees found the cherry blossom very white and sweet in the sunshine, an England that was full of those faint perfumes that eschew the highroads. Bonthorn lit a pipe, and lying at ease in his deck chair, felt himself part of the place and its loveliness. Yew End. The coral arils of the yew.

The lane going up past his holly hedge to the secret meadows of Beech Farm. A green cleft under the blue sky and the white clouds. The long, golden buds of the beeches unfolding millions of emerald fans. High woods with bluebells thick in them and glimmering windflowers, and steep, grassy slopes brilliant with broom. Hedges ready to break into the blossom of the thorn, a fragrance that the wild honeysuckle would repeat. Bracken crooking through. The misty willows and murmuring aspens where the stream ran down to the Mill House. The great cedars of Stella Lacey, and its Scotch Pines red-throated to the sunset. Birds. The complex confederation of the grasses, poas, fescues, fox-tails. And behind him that funny old white cottage, with its green shutters, vines, roses, glycine, a low, lovable cottage, sitting rather like some white bird deep in a green nest. In the hall a clock went tick-tock as though it understood the relativity of time. The rooms had a kind of exquisite, faded dimness.

Bonthorn lay and looked up through the branches of the cherry tree. What strange differences there were in this mysterious and diverse world. Why should the bark of a cherry tree be unlike the bark of a pear? Why should people rush to and fro along those miles of tarmac? Why should Rollo be Rollo? Did it matter if the soul of this most mysterious world was somehow the soul of your secret, happy self? To grow flowers instead of discords. Politics! Good God!

The dog began to play with his shoe, and while rolling the Cairn to and fro on the grass, Bonthorn dreamed, though his dreams were like the threads of a tapestry wilfully woven. If you dreamed of new flowers, cunning was needed to create them. But that was his job in life, work for the eye and the hand, the planned mating of pollen grain and ovule, even the cheating of the bee. Three acres of garden, a garden that was the workshop of the hybridist, the canvas of the artist, the laboratory of the chemist, a little corner in the conception of God.

"Petulant and sweet—petulant and sweet."

Some thrush's variant and over the grass the footsteps of Martha coming to clear away the tea. She had a quiet voice and quiet movements. She seemed to fit into his lonely life like a shadow into the hollow of a hedge.

She made a remark as she folded up the cloth, and it was to

the effect that the London-Lignor road was noisier than usual. Bonthorn had not noticed it, but he supposed that it could be so.

"So long as they don't come up our lane."

Mrs. Martha patted the cloth.

"No, we shouldn't want them up here, should we? And us not daring to let the dog out of the gate. But I can remember that road on a Sunday, a few lads on bikes with bunches of flow-ers tied to the handlebars, and people going to church."

Bonthorn echoed her.

"People going to church! How strange!"

She tucked the cloth over an arm and picked up the tray.

"Sort of makes one feel old, sir. Not getting the feel of all these new things."

"Yes, the feel of them. Need one?"

"But that road! Funny—the notions that come into one's head. One used to walk on a road. There's that story in the Bible about the legion of swine——"

"Not swine, Martha."

Softly he laughed, and she remained there for a moment with the tray.

"Well, I tell you one thing, sir, that place down there is the new sort of church."

"You mean the Mill House?"

"Sure-ly. Goings on. Blue tables with pink cloths."

"Yes, pink is provocative, Martha."

"And yellow umbrellas, and a loud-speaker shouting, and all those young women and lads. If they serve one tea on a Sunday they serve a hundred. That's Sunday."

She made a kind of clucking noise and departed with the tray, and Bonthorn sat and listened to the distant discords of the London-Lignor road. It did not disturb him; it was too far away; in fact it seemed to emphasize the secrecy and the seclusion of his own celibate corner. Almost, it was like the hum of another planet, or some heated meteoric phenomenon that would pass and burn itself out. It was steel, not protoplasm. Life for him centred about the secrecy of the cell.

Dreamer he might be, but also he was the man of routine. His rhythm was of the earth and of the things that grew. A puff-ball might be both a weed and a mystic clock. Had any man or

woman in that crowd down yonder ever looked closely at one of those furry, perfect parachutes? When the whole world did begin to look at such things——!

He got up out of his chair. He spoke to the wise little eyes of the dog.

"Come on, you little thing. Parade."

The Cairn's hairy and alert face brisked itself. There were three sharp barks, and then silence. They set off together along a path under drooping lilacs. The dog had learnt to adapt himself to the larger and more mysterious activities of the man. Parade. There was the close boarded gate in the thorn hedge that had rabbit wire protecting it. The sacred precinct, no scratchings and furious rushes here, and never a rabbit. The man-god kept strange treasures in this place, green things that grew out of the ground, plants that would sometimes wear queer white gossamer veils. As usual the man-god went round past the potting shed with its old red-brick wall and the green water-butt at the corner. Then came that other queer and exciting building with a funny old white cupola and a weather vane, its doors a faded blue. Rollo was moved to sniff at those doors. Mysterious interiors, rats, mice, elusive smells.

Then, a broad path with bricks on edge dividing stretches of earth in which things grew. There were white slips of wood. Obviously, Mr. Bonthorn was infatuated with this strange place where a dog had to behave as though the whole of it were one clean, kitchen floor. Mr. Bonthorn might have buried innumerable bones here. It suggested the presence of strange, fascinating smells.

Rollo might be sympathetic to a point, sitting on a stumpy tail with an air of docile puzzlement. He did not know that one of those Bearded Irises—"Bayard" had brandished a blazing standard as far as California. "Dame Georgiana," a great lady among the delphiniums in the early stateliness of her growth, had travelled back from London with a gold medallion round her throat. The strange preoccupations of man! Bending over those green things, touching them, caressing them! One blue eye sending deliberate and wise glances here, there and everywhere.

And in those solitary places on a Sunday, Rollo might sit and

turn a head this way and that, and paw tentatively and apologetically at some tempting stone.

"No, my lad, no rampagings here."

But afterwards the dog would have his hour, delirious moments chasing an old rubber ball on the grass verges of the lane.

Chapter Two

I

MRS. ROBINIA BUCK, being the widow of one of His Majesty's Civil Servants, might have mounted the Lion and the Unicorn over the doorway of the Mill House at Monks Lacey. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*. Mrs. Buck's daughters, long-legged, comely young women, were too healthily modern to wear such a text upon their garters.

Black and purple. The colours blended well with the Misses Buck, who were both dark young women, and unlike their mother who was one of those neutral tinted persons about whom Nature had not been able to make up her mind, but the dominance of Buck had settled the inheritance by giving darkness to the daughters. As for the Mill House, it had ceased to be old English and to grind corn. A wheel had turned here when the monks of Stella Lacey had seen to it that their tenants carried their corn to be ground here at a price.

Now, there were other wheels, wire, steel disc and artillery, thousands upon thousands of wheels whirling to and fro along the black road. A hundred yards beyond the hedge a white notice-board warned the world:

YE OLD MILL HOUSE

Lunches. • Teas. Petrol.

Robinia had been responsible for the "Ye." Rhoda's touch had persuaded the petrol pump to colour itself purple. Rachel, a little less Buckish than her sister, administered the flowers.

But on a Whit-Sunday with the sun shining! Two young women in black dresses and stockings and purple aprons rushing to and fro with trays, circulating among tables, growing at times a little short-tempered, and venting it upon each other.

"O, get out of my way!"

"Don't be so touchy."

They would meet outside the serving-hatch opening into the kitchen through which Robinia and a cottage girl hired for the day, thrust trays upon which the china was white and purple. Rhoda was more strenuous than Rachel, more full of adjectival verve and colloquial back-chat. There were moments when Rachel dreamed, and would lose herself in a passing contemplation of the water and the willows. There was in her a quality that her more vivid sister lacked. Her young audacity was tempered by sudden shadows of mystery, moments of indecision, by wonder at things. Her reactions were more sensitive and subtle than Rhoda's. Her face, slightly Mongolian, with high cheekbones and nose broadening at the nostrils, sustained with its large expressive mouth and brown eyes set rather wide under a low, straight forehead, a sensuous and pleasant appetite for life.

"Ceylon or China, please?"

The two girls differed in their asking of that question. Rhoda put it aggressively as though no person who possessed a car of any horse-power would deign to drink the washy, vapid decoction of Cathay. Rachel asked it more sympathetically, and with the suggestion that particular people might have sensitive palates. Even in personal poise and the carrying of trays the two sisters maintained their contrasts. Rachel had more lissom, sinuous movements. Rhoda strode, back well hollowed, and shoulders squared.

On this Sunday in the spring of the year, with a mild heat-wave confounding the weather forecast, the world was a world of wheels and of little tables. Cars were strung along the grass, and the old mill-yard was full of them. There were tables under the big chestnut tree by the bridge whose huge green canopy made the yellow umbrellas on the flagged space outside the Mill House look like trivial toadstools. The tea-room itself, cool and spacious, with its old beams browned, held all that it could carry. There was a faint haze over the river and the meadows, and the water ran like melted glass between the willows.

Rachel was not very well that day, but when your livelihood depends upon seizing the busy hour and rushing hither and thither with plates of bread and butter and cake and trays of

crockery, the failings of the flesh have to be discounted. The day had brought a tempest of teas. People seemed a little impatient and very thirsty.

"Miss—hot water."

Half the tables demanded additional hot water.

"Yes, in a minute."

An impatient fellow with two dressy young women in tow, and a Bentley waiting in the yard, kept glancing at a wristwatch.

"Waitress——"

Rachel tried to skid round him, for there is an art in avoiding the over self-important.

"Waitress——"

"Yes, in a minute——"

"We've been sitting here twenty minutes. We want tea."

He was emphatic, and she did not contradict him. He might have been static there for hours for all she knew. The day and its devoir were a little blurred to her, a moving mosaic of tables and yet more tables, of people who looked so alike, of bodies insinuated into pull-overs and jumpers, of heads in hats and without hats. It was one of those days when every table was a sort of impatient, white eye waiting to catch hers. The world on wheels was not a patient world. It had to work its way in the Sunday queue some fifty miles or so to some suburb. She was conscious of the noise of the road. It roared and clattered and detonated. It seemed to surge so close to the white posts and chairs in front of the Mill House grounds. The Georgian bridge was hog-backed and rather narrow. Everybody hooted there. Klaxons gulped. There were screams, trumpetings.

Someone pushed a chair back unexpectedly, and caught her foot. A tray crashed. A blue shoulder shrank in angry protest.

"Damn——!"

"I'm most awfully sorry——"

Milk on crêpe-de-chine! And the wearer truculent.

"You've spoilt my frock."

"I'm most awfully sorry. Someone pushed a chair. If you'll come inside——"

She felt a little dizzy, confused. What did you do for milk on crêpe-de-chine? The stain might have been ink, for she was conscious of spots of blackness.

"If you'll come inside——"

The retort was tart.

"No thanks. I'll have it cleaned and send you the bill. You've got too many tables here. Not room to move."

A nice lad in a blue-and-white pullover helped her with the debris. She went in rather unsteadily, passing Rhoda striding out with a tray in either hand, and looking as though she was going to confront the world and flout it.

"Mother's calling. See—will you?"

The coolness of the old stone building welcomed her. But here were more tables, more faces, a beckoning hand or two.

"Miss——"

She heard Mrs. Binnie's voice like a bit of bunting flapping in distress.

"Rachel! Rachel——!"

What next? Were they out of milk as on that disastrous day last year? If you could keep a cow as you kept a petrol pump and just turn a handle!

"Rachel——!"

She diverged towards the kitchen with the dishevelled tray. Someone tweaked her skirt. She was aware of a small child crying quietly at the table.

"A glass of milk, Miss."

"Don't be so silly, Gertie. Father won't bring you out again."

A small voice bleated: "I's tired. I want t'go home."

Again the voice of Mrs. Binnie: "Rachel, Rhoda——"

She found herself in the kitchen, and observing the hired girl sucking a bleeding finger. There was a dab of blood on the girl's chin. A knife and a loaf of bread on a dresser suggested an explanation.

Mrs. Binnie, looking as though she had been fighting a heath-fire on a hot day, uttered a wailing protest.

"Mary's cut her finger. Bread and butter. We're three plates behind. For God's sake—girl——"

Rachel stood for an instant quite still. Qualms, blood, bread, that stolid young woman sucking a knuckle! The world became a blackness. The unfortunate tray suffered a second crash. She fainted.

II

Monday and washing-day, because the world went back to its work, and the heart of the country was glad.

It was Rachel's turn to fire the old-fashioned copper and to make a stew of the week's tablecloths and the household linen, not together, mark you, for the Mill House had a conscience in the matter of a nice cleanliness. And how thoughtless the world was even upon the topic of tablecloths. There were people who slopped tea and spilt jam, and treated clean linen as they treated the face of God's country. Litter, messes for other people to clean up, stains to be effaced, and without a protest.

Poor Mrs. Binnie would lament: "Seven stained cloths this week, and one with a knife cut in it."

Rhoda, more combative than her mother and her sister, would have pinned up notices, the texts of a clean-limbed efficiency.

A soiled cloth is a spoilt cloth.

Remember, your carelessness costs other people time and money.

Have a little imagination.

Rachel knew that it was necessary to be gentle with this linen, for it represented capital, precious cash. The impatience of youth had somehow been chastened in her by those glimpses of her mother putting on spectacles and holding linen up to the light. Was it wearing thin?

But on this Monday morning she had all the pink sails spread in the little grassy corner behind the Mill House. They hung in windless peace, and to her came one of those moods of inattention when eyes look beyond the mere moment. She sat down on the grass close to the water. Her consciousness became part of the scene, an immense, soft greenness, blue sky, the placid pool lipping the water-flags and sedges, full of reflections. The chestnut tree rose above the stone roof, and was covered with wax candles. The apple blossom in the little orchard had fallen, but in the bushy hedges of the lane beyond the stream the may-flower was out. A Lombardy poplar glimmered faintly, but the shock-headed willows seemed to catch no wind.

A row of red cottage tulips and forget-me-nots strung along a fence. The grey walls of the mill-house, the old hoist with its rusty wheel, six casements, a blue door. Her glances wandered farther. A strip of meadow full of buttercups, the smooth green hillsides blurred with patches of yellow broom, the woods so vividly and variously green. Those larches up there, exquisite, fairy trees.

She saw a hat passing in the lane, an old brown hat. The head and shoulders of a man became visible for a moment. Mr. Bonthorn, otherwise Old One Eye. But how old was he? Forty? Inevitably he seemed to go by like that, always seen in profile, brown, lean, aloof, a little mysterious. A hawk-man—but somehow not so fierce as a hawk. Never did that one eye seem to diverge towards woman.

She was conscious of a twinge of laughter.

How quaint to be so separative! And so silent! What did he think about? Nothing but flowers? Odd creature, sometimes using a stick that was like a staff, a sort of Aaron's Rod. Almost he might have come out of the Bible. Attach a beard and he would have possessed the presence of a prophet.

She pulled a grass stem and sucked it. She wondered whether the same swallows would come and build under the eaves? And that flowery frock in a shop-window at Lignor? Her left stocking had a hole in the heel, and she had not had time to mend it. Also, a man? She was not quite sure about that particular man or about herself. She was less sure about things than Rhoda. Stanley Shelp? Shelp? Did the name suggest too much largeness, too much hot self-confidence, something swarthy and a little arrogant?

"Rachel——"

She became aware of her mother standing on that queer timber platform at the back of the mill. It had white posts and rails. A strip of water slid under it.

"Rachel."

"Hallo!"

"I've had a bill for that dress you spilt the milk over."

Really, how mean! To get a free-clean for a frock, and to send the bill in so soon. A week ago! Just a little milk spilt in the confusion of a crowded Sunday!

But her mother was worried, and long ago it had become obvious to Rachel that her mother was like a woman pursued in a dark lane by some phantom shape. Robinia had the eyes of a hare, and a fearful and busy restlessness. Even her hair fled back from her poor forehead and frightened eyes. A figure that was both futile yet somehow heroic, incapable of accomplishing things, and yet accomplishing them. With her nervous, finicking fingers she had picked up the threads when her husband's hands had left them in a tangle; she had unravelled them and worked them into a pattern. Rachel could not remember a time when her mother had not been in a hurry, chasing her own tail and yet contriving to elude the world's judgment of her as a perfect fool.

Rachel gathered herself up.

"Sorry, mumsie. I'll pay it out of my allowance."

"O, there's no need for that."

"O, yes—I shall."

Mrs. Binnie disappeared again like a rabbit into a hole. She was a little woman with a stoop, and when she walked she gave one the impression that her head was moving faster than her feet. She would either sag right over like a flaccid stem or fall forward on her nose. She did neither. Her hands might betray a nervous tremor, but they did not drop things.

Rachel crossed over to the clothes line and felt one of the cloths. The washing was drying well. She heard a char-a-banc thundering over the bridge and the sound of singing. Yes, even on a Monday morning the road could be restless, like a black thread in the new web that was England, and responding to the jerks and tremors of all those other threads. Even the vibrations of Fleet Street were registered at Monks Lacey. Restlessness. There were days when Rachel felt herself troubled by the restlessness of the road, its endless coming and going, its cry of whence and whither. The grey stone building would tremble to the tread of lorries. Speed, adventure. At night, in her attic bedroom, she would hear some fast car come zooming to the bridge, slacken for a moment as though gathering itself for a leap, utter a sharp, strident cry, and rush on.

Chapter Three

I

THE cupola clock at Stella Lacey struck five, and Mrs. Buck glanced at her own clock in the tea-room. It had been a quiet day, so quiet that the girls had gone up to Lignor on an adventure of their own.

The red van arrived with a gentle surreptitiousness, and parking itself on the piece of grass beyond the gate, extruded a human figure, something round and bald with large spectacles and much shirt front. The redness of the van was sacred neither to the G.P.O. nor to advanced propaganda. It was nothing more and nothing less than an itinerant pill-shop.

Its owner toddled across to the bridge and stood for a moment in contemplation of the millpool, meadows and trees. He removed his spectacles and polished them as though to do justice to this piece of England, the flickering pool, the water brimming and tumbling at the weir, the sedges and water-flags in gentle movement.

"Marvellous!"

He used youth's adjective but he used it differently, and though his smile was full of artifice as to the teeth, his sense of atmosphere was sound. The noise of running water and its coolness! He faced about, and crossing the tarred high-road, stood for a moment under the chestnut tree. Being something of a peripatetic philosopher on wheels he could take off his hat to progress.

"Well—Mrs. Binnie."

Robinia was darning a hole in a teacloth. She had been engaged in exactly the same piece of work six months ago, sitting up rather like a squirrel with a nut in her hands and black eyes alert. To the owner of the red van she was woman mending an eternal teacloth.

"Bless us, it's you!"

She had used just the same expression on previous occasions. The little man crinkled his eyes at her, and removed his hat.

"Always at it. How's business?"

"Come in, Sam. No, I can't grumble."

"And the girls, bless 'em?"

He gathered that the girls were much as usual.

Mrs. Buck was pleased to see him, not because he or his posterous pills were anything to be proud of, but because she had known him for some thirty years and had found in him a listener. As a rule no one listened to her. It had been a habit of Mr. Buck's to make the remark from behind his paper: "Still talking, Binnie?" and her daughters—though fond of her—were equally inattentive. Sam Prodgers listened. He was like a little stout white jug of a man into which gossip could be poured. He was interested in people. He had a bright eye, and a sense of humour, but he could keep his sense of humour from getting under a woman's feet and tripping her up. Also, he was a distant relation, though Tom Buck had spoken of him habitually and scathingly as a mountebank.

Mrs. Binnie was up and active.

"You'll take some tea, Sam?"

He would. He sat down in one of the basket chairs, and surveyed the room. It had been re-decorated during the winter, and in the style of Rhoda-Rachel, and not of Mrs. Robinia. The roses of Edwardianism had fallen. The walls suggested a series of sunsets separated by black pilasters. The spaces between the rafters were speckled with purple and orange stars. Also, there was a small dance floor amid the chairs and tables.

Mr. Prodgers had never exceeded the redness of his van, but when the van was in action he did indulge in coloured lights and cracklings and coruscations. Professor Prodgers's Electro-Magnetic Pills! He showed the public his pills being treated electrically in large glass tubes.

"Say, Binnie, you've crowded in some colour."

Mrs. Buck, pausing on her way to the kitchen, apologized for the room.

"The girls' idea. I'd have had it all white."

"That's not noisy enough, Binnie."

"It almost gives me a headache. And what with the wireless, and the gramophone——!"

"Have to be up-to-date, you know."

Mrs. Buck's lips quivered.

"Up-to-date, Sam. Things seem to change every five minutes, like the tunes. I feel I get out of breath—sometimes—trying to keep up with them."

Mr. Prodgers nodded.

"Yes; everything's on wheels."

He could speak with authority. For more than twenty years he had been trundling about England, exploiting cathedral cities and market towns. In his early days he had travelled at the tail of a horse and had been able to talk confidentially and sociably to the beast. "Now then—Sequah—get along, old lad." The petrol engine had changed those leisurely, ruminant days. Mr. Prodgers never felt friendly towards his engine. He damned it on occasions, especially when it refused to fire late on a Saturday night when some market-place was full of darkness and debris, and he felt hoarse and tired. "Curse you and your sanguinary plugs." In a sense he was the slave of pills, progress and the machine. In pre-war days he had managed to make a living in ten counties, and mostly south of the Thames and the Severn, but now the red van carried as far as York and Chester. Education—competition, cash chemists. He had to cover more ground and shout more lustily—he had taken to a megaphone—in order to live.

Mrs. Binnie appeared with a tea-tray.

"I can't give you buttered toast, Sam. There's no fire."

"Never you mind. Toast and oil stoves don't harmonize. I ought to know."

He observed two cups on the tray. So Robinia had not lost her love for tea, though probably it gave her indigestion. But why worry? To attempt the alleviation of life's little sins and their dyspepsias is to burn incense before a great illusion. And though he was pedlar of pills he had never attempted to work off a box upon Robinia. He snuggled into his chair.

"Well, you ought to be doing pretty well here, Binnie. You deserve to."

She fussed over the tea-tray, and Samuel supposed that she

would fuss in heaven and make restless flutterings with her wings. But he had affection and respect for Robinia Buck. She turned her wheel. She kept clucking bravely in a farm-yard that was to her a place of pother, progress and confusion. She might appear perpetually flurried and bewildered, but she carried on.

"Two lumps, Sam?"

"As usual."

He sat and wondered at her. Tom Buck had left her two daughters, some furniture, and about fifty pounds in cash. To begin with she had taken to dressmaking, and had run a small tea-shop in Lignor. She had taken a still larger shop, saved money somehow, and then—with a kind of restless sagacity, and seizing what had appeared to be her opportunity, she had sunk all her capital in the Mill House at Monks Lacey. A mixture of whimsicality and wisdom? And if anything she looked more worried than ever. Well, probably that was her fate.

"Girls out?"

"They're gone to Lignor."

"You're rather lucky, Binnie, as things go."

She sat perched like a bird, her head on one side.

"There's one thing that worries me, Sam."

"What's that?"

"I do wish they weren't quite so good looking."

The philosopher dealt with a mouthful of bread and butter.

"Is that all? And—after all—it's a lot. Paradise and the Pyramids."

"It worries me, Sam."

"Things do. You wouldn't be— Besides, it's an asset."

"Now, don't say that."

"I do say it. A couple of good-looking—"

"Honey pots, Sam. I used to say to Tom that it was a girl's misfortune—looks."

"And he didn't agree with you, did he? You weren't a bad-looking girl yourself, my dear."

But her anxiety was authentic, and over the tea-table she passed it to Samuel Progers, while with an occasional flick of the hand she denied three predatory flies the right to settle on the sugar or the cakes. All through life she had been at war

with Beelzebub in his multifarious manifestations, only to suspect that Beelzebub had been playing peep-bo with her at every corner. She confessed to being bothered, bewildered, worried. She did not understand her daughters. She did not understand their new world and its tendencies. She asserted that there were times when she had a feeling of horrible insecurity, that the whole structure was a paper sham, and the Book of Common Prayer a mediæval relic.

"Well, and so it is, Binnie."

She was shocked. She wanted the skeleton of her old world re-clothed in the familiar flesh, and here was Sam too seeing it as a skeleton.

"Sam, I did think you'd agree with me."

"And so I do, but I live on wheels. Change and decay, no—not quite. We're not so lugubrious as some of the old hymns. After all, it's all a sort of sham, isn't it? Self-suggestion. We just pretend. And I gather that the young things do less pretending."

Mrs. Binnie exclaimed:

"It's their morals, Sam."

"Morals——!"

"They're so easy about the—— No sense of responsibility. It worries me dreadfully."

Mr. Prodgers passed her his cup.

"The fact is, Binnie, we used to fuss too much. We used to lock the cupboard, pocket the key, and bluff human nature. God in a top-hat and wearing a beard, a sort of Divine scarecrow. Well, there isn't any God these days, or not that sort of god. The young things don't think any more of Him than they do of Father Christmas. Possibly they've pulled the false beard off our morality."

Mrs. Robinia was so discouraged that she forgot to re-fill his cup.

"Sam, are you serious?"

"Not so serious as I used to be, my dear. There is something in the modern point of view. The war was a pretty bad crash for the conventions. We got up looking blue and bothered. We saw all sorts of naked things lying about, the dolls, we'd dressed up. Well—what's happened? The new generation laughs. It makes a joke of our old wax-work show. Everything's a joke; sex,

marriage, even my pills. I suppose we were getting too smug and serious, and someone had to shy green apples at us."

Mrs. Binnie noticed the empty cup and re-filled it. But she forgot the sugar; she even forgot to wave aside the septic flies.

"Sam—what does it say somewhere about green fruit, and people's teeth being on edge?"

"O, yes, my dear, there always will be green fruit, and pains in the world's tummy. These young things——"

II

Someone blew a horn outside the Mill House as though its walls were the walls of Jericho, and since its voice mimicked the voice of Mr. Prodgers's red van, he suspected the presence of children.

"One moment, Binnie. That sounds very much like my horn. Someone's playing a game with it."

He put down his cup and went to the door, and on that quiet day the flagged space between the house and the white posts and chains was innocent of tables. It staged other surprises, a small, impudent urchin of a car with a silver bonnet and vermilion body, and crowded into it like children in a bath two girls and two men.

"Hallo, Prof! You here?"

He was very much there, or—at least—he thought so. And hadn't they noticed the red van? Rhoda, at the wheel, was trying to extract a leg and emerge, but the congestion was serious.

"Get out, Fred—I can't move."

Fred obeyed her, a long, fair lad with shy eyes and an air of young gravity. The other gentleman was less likeable, and in less of a hurry to dissociate himself from the tangle, perhaps because he had Rachel on his knees. He was not quite new to the professor, who recognized him as one Mr. Stanley Shelp, clerk to the Collector of Taxes at Lignor, a large, heavy, sallow fellow of infinite assurance. He was in no hurry to move. He was the man in possession, holding Rachel round the waist, and looking a good deal too complacent about it.

But if the professor could not say what he would like to have said, Rhoda supplied the abruptness.

"Get out, Stanley."

"Better tell Rachel to get off my knees."

"Don't be an idiot."

Rhoda used an elbow, and Rachel, with a protesting scuffle, slipped out on a pair of long legs.

"Silly ass."

Mr. Prodgers thought the phrase worthy of repetition.

"Yes, silly ass."

And Stanley Shelp looked at him, being the sort of fellow who took life and himself with gross seriousness.

III

Mrs. Robinia made gestures as of throwing up her hands.

"Well—really! It's beyond me—— Who's to——"

Her daughters had bought the car through Mr. Tanrock, the fair boy with the shy eyes whose father owned Tanrock's Garage at Lignor. A bargain, certainly, thirty pounds, and with more than six months' insurance to run. Four years old! Did it look older? Yes, the front wings were a bit dissipated. But Fred had overhauled the machine; everything was O.K.; the tyres would do another three thousand miles.

The two young men lit cigarettes and strolled across to the bridge, figures of self-conscious superfluity. The old lady was not taking it well, and young Tanrock was feeling a little guilty.

"I'm in the soup over this."

Shelp, hunching shoulders of an arrogant bulkiness over the bridge wall, pushed his hat back and laughed. He was the sort of man who wore grey flannel trousers that were too loose everywhere, and whose coat wrinkled over his fat back. He had a truculence of neck and chin, eyes of a sensual brownness, insolent eyes. His laugh had no sense of fun in it.

"O, they'll twist the old woman's tail."

But Mrs. Binnie's tail was still erect, if tremulous. Really! Bringing home a thing like this, a wretched little tin pan! Who was to pay for it? What, it had been paid for? Out of their allowances? Well, really! And the accumulated twopenny tips! But who was to pay for the petrol and the tax and the tyres?

"O, don't fuss, old thing. It's not going to cost you a penny."

"Well—really! When we want every penny in the business."

Rhoda reasoned with her mother as she would have reasoned with a fractious and excited child.

"We want it for the winter. We can't be stuck here, mater, like a couple—of—O—well—never mind. We want some sort of show."

"Rushing off to Brighton, I suppose?"

"Exactly."

Mr. Prodgers, also feeling superfluous, had slipped back into the Mill House to finish his tea. He could appreciate both sides of the question. The world on wheels, and poor Mrs. Binnie mending tablecloths. Of course!

And then she joined him. She shut the door with an agitated bang. She was in tears.

"Sam, I'm—I'm beaten."

She subsided in a chair.

"O, nonsense—Binnie——"

"As if I didn't want them to have things— Of course—I do. But going off like that, and not telling me. No sense of responsibility. Just—recklessness. I won't have the car here—I——"

Mr. Prodgers went up and patted her shoulder.

"Easy—Binnie. O—yes—you will. They must have their show, you know. They work for it, don't they?"

"But—Sam—more expense. I'm trying so hard to save."

"I know. Youth—spends—my dear. Hallo——"

He saw a face in the doorway, Rachel's. They exchanged glances, smiles of meaning.

"Mumsie—we want you to come for the first drive. The boys are going to walk back."

Mrs. Binnie rocked in her chair.

"Never——"

"O, yes, do. You don't get out enough. We won't go fast, just up to Hook Hill and back."

"But who's to look after the house?"

Mr. Prodgers patted her shoulder.

"Go on, Binnie, move with the times. I'll stay here till you all come back."

IV

Bonthorn came over the bridge. He observed, and was observed by young Tanrock and Shelp of the grey flannel trousers, and his impressions were as quick as his prejudices. Young Tanrock, though strange to him, was pleasantly English, but Shelp he knew, and the little he knew of him was sufficient. A greasy, truculent fellow, and somewhat fungoid. But he nodded at Shelp.

Shelp's stare was an insult, and meant as such.

"Who's the card?"

He explained to young Tanrock the refined offensiveness of Bonthorn.

"That! Fellow who grows flowers. Don't you get the smell of him, Oxford and honeysuckle? So bloody superior. I had a chance to teach him something."

"O—how?"

"In the way of business. Came into our office one day to tell us we had got our figures wrong."

"And had you?"

"Not likely. He didn't get any silver out of me."

But Bonthorn was gathering other impressions, the shadows under the chestnut tree, and of Mrs. Binnie being tucked into a vermilion vehicle by one of her daughters, while the other daughter wound a handle. Mr. Prodgers in a doorway, smoking a pipe, and on the grass beyond the gate Mr. Prodgers's red van. Bonthorn remembered the van and smiled at it. He had seen the professor in action on a warm July night in Lignor market-place, a preposterous and urgent figure in top hat, black tie and dinner-jacket, waving a white wand, and producing coruscations and flashes, oratorical and otherwise. A mountebank! And Bonthorn had loved him, and because of the joy the professor had caused him, he had pushed through the half ironical and gaping crowd and had bought a box of pills.

Nicholas Bonthorn walked on the grass beside a stretch of the old Roman road until he came to the lower lodge of Stella Lacey and the great avenue of beeches. They were in fullness of young leaf, and as he followed the park road under these towering trees he was glad of Gloriana Gurney. What a woman and what a name! Looking at life with her air of whimsical melan-

choly she had said to him: "After me—death duties and the deluge. And yet—the ghosts of these trees will stand." Yes, he supposed that when she died these trees would fall to demons, and to the Shelps of the new dispensation.

But what a woman! Dame Gloriana Gurney writing her book upon the Gardens of England! Gloriana. Even the name was archaic and incredible and splendid, like a page from Spenser, or an Arthurian sonnet. Gloriana Gurney—Stanley Shelp. Stella Lacey and the new cubes in concrete.

He had her letter in his pocket.

"DEAR MR. BONTORN,

"If you can spare the time do come and look at 'Dame Isa-beau.' She is in full dress.

"And I wish you would cast an eye upon my phloxes. Lavender says it was the north-east wind last month, but I am afraid of something more serious.

"Yours sincerely,

"G. GURNEY."

Had he time to go to Stella Lacey? Assuredly, he would have walked up there on two wooden legs.

As to her phloxes, probably they were being attacked by eel worm and would have to be put on the bonfire, which was sad.

Chapter Four

I

FOR centuries the stillness of this green valley had remained virginal and inviolate, and the cupola clock over the Georgian stables of Stella Lacey seemed to claim this silence when it struck the deliberate hours.

"Mine, mine, mine."

Did a fish jump in the moat the valley might have heard it, though in the spring of the year the birds made at dawn so great a clamour that the very trees seemed to tremble. So far as Gloriana's ears served her it was a thrush who began it, and always from the top of one of the cedars. With the strange steadfastness of nature, on the same spire for an infinite number of years a thrush had led those multitudinous sweet pipings.

She opened the door in the wall and saw the six white pillars of the portico standing like ghosts. The oak door made a little creaking as she swung it back. She passed along the brick path of the rose garden to the arched opening in the yew hedge, and here the turf began, and the cedars, and the twelve clipped yews, the historic yews of Stella Lacey. She moved noiselessly, skirting the branches of a cedar where darkly they almost touched the grass. Another yew hedge rose like a deep-green wall with flecks of gold upon it, and beyond it lay the terrace with its statues and its two garden houses, and beyond the terrace lay the moat.

Venus, Eros, Pan.

The robins would perch on the leaden heads of these statues, and ever and again a gardener with bucket and cloth would wash Venus, Eros and Pan, and remove the white anointings.

She stood on the terrace and listened, a woman with very white hair, and eyes of whimsical tenderness. She still had beauty, the beauty of one who had grown old with dignity, and who—when life tore illusion after illusion from her, held fast to a jocund

sense of life's humorous inevitableness. Here—on the terrace—the troubling of the valley's stillness became sound, as though the Jacobean walls of Stella Lacey caught these vibrations and transmuted them into vague rumblings. So, during the war, she had sometimes heard the guns in Flanders, and the sound of the slaughter on the Somme.

In those days she had stood by one of the pedestals, and made an inward murmuring.

"What does Pan say? Can Pan hear the guns? O, unhappy summer, unhappy generation! Old things and thoughts blown to pieces."

Her two sons had died over yonder, Oliver in front of Ypres, Victor near Contalmaison. Stella Lacey itself had had its death wound there. It lived while she lived.

She walked towards one of the garden-houses and entered it, and opening one of the lattices between the mullions, looked out. This gazebo gave upon the valley, and between the beeches and the clumps of old Scotch pine she could follow the windings of the river to the grey bridge at Monks Lacey. A portion of the Mill House was visible, a slip of tarmac, and perhaps two or three yellow umbrellas.

A tea-house, a petrol pump, the Buck family, modernity multitudinous and mechanical, and to her—both strangely futile and wholly inevitable.

Those dreadful young women!

No, not dreadful—but different. Twelve years ago she might have referred to them as dreadful, but not now. Though, if her sons had been alive? Well—yes, possibly. Oliver—most certainly—would have been seeking adventure down yonder, lured by flesh-coloured legs even as his Georgian forefathers had glimpsed a red stocking. Mrs. Buck and her daughters, and young men with untidy heads and electric pull-overs and floppy grey trousers, and an air of promiscuous intimacy. But just how promiscuous was it?

She would say to herself: "Don't be old. Don't grouse against youth. Youth is the same and different. It looks at life as it looks at a car. How does it go, how fast will it go? I see, I want, I take. We took in the old days, and somehow made our takings seem gracious and pleasant. These—the new ones—are taking from

us now. Get—quickly; there is no mumbo-jumbo God to balk you.”

She heard footsteps on the flags of the terrace. Bonthorn had arrived, and was in search of her. She saw him standing by Eros, all brown in the evening sunlight, and somehow suggesting the happy celibate. She saw both the priest and the soldier in him, a figure in bronze from one of the Gallipoli beaches, rather like one of those hawk-headed Australians. He glowed in khaki drill. Were those strange clothes of his relics of the war, or did he have them made for him? The Flower Man looking at Eros with a kind of gentle fierceness.

She spoke to him from the shadows of the garden-house.

“Mr. Bonthorn, I’m here.”

His blue eye searched for her. He suggested the heat and the glare and the dust of Cape Helles, where he had left the other eye. She moved into the doorway, smiling at him and his unusualness.

“Almost like hide and seek.”

He had no hat, and he saluted her.

“They sent me out to find you. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Why should I—when I am wasting your time?”

“Hardly that. A man finds excuses——”

Her glance was whimsical.

“For doing what he wants to do?”

“Exactly.”

He stood still, as though his world waited upon hers.

“Some places and people reassure one.”

She joined him.

“Do you need reassuring?”

“Sometimes. Even names are reassuring. Oriana of the Moated Grange. Your valley is looking very beautiful to-night.”

She moved to the terrace wall and looked down at the white lilies in the moat.

She said: “It is so difficult to realize that a beauty like this dies. To you—I suppose—it might seem so permanent.”

And then she laughed.

“I am an old woman, Mr. Bonthorn, in an age when no one is supposed to grow old. One arrives at the impersonal. Both my sons were killed in the war. Had they lived, it would not

have been here—after me. Even this terrace, which seems so solid, slips from under one's feet."

She turned to him half questioningly.

"Does it strike you as sad?"

"You mean——?"

"This other England that is dying? No—I am not being gloomy. No tradition is final, thank God. We people who lived spaciouly and thought of ourselves as England, and who put our servants to live in cellars and sent missionaries and millions to the so-called heathen! To appear sententious and selfish and superfluous to the new age? Why not? This place is just a beautiful dead shell."

He thought for a moment.

"Not dead! Surely not dead?"

"Not yet, perhaps. Five years ago I planted that bank of flowering trees and shrubs over there. You saw it—a month or so ago."

He nodded.

"Double cherries—pink and white, Siberian crab, *Pyrus Floribunda*, *Pyrus Purpurea*, lilacs, red may, a touch of *laburnum*. Is that death?"

Again her eyes were whimsical.

"Death duties do not consider flowering shrubs and water lilies. The *Stella Lacey*s—are—museum pieces. Yet, if one is a mystic——"

"All gardeners are mystics."

"Oh, don't generalize. One has to sit still with beauty, and this age cannot sit still."

He passed a hand over the weathered stone of the parapet.

"Are you sure? Was any age so flower-loving? Was any age so full of a divine discontent? Even the rush and the restlessness. Confusion, but the confusion of——"

"Change."

"Why not—creation?"

She stood reflecting.

"Prejudices—without prejudice! That road down there, all the new roads, a vast sameness, that mill-house a tea-shop, two long-legged girls, trippers in *char-a-bancs*. I ask myself—— But how *bête* to ask if it is good, or better, or different? It just—is."

"Yes, it just is."

She made a movement as of smoothing her hair.

"And the solution? I could give you one from America."

He bridled.

"America!"

"My Californian friend, Mr. Jonathan G. Cripps. You've met him."

"And what does Mr. Cripps say?"

"Just this. You English are finished. You are blind to your own beauty. Over there we are—or some of us—are just getting our eyes wide to it. We—or some of us—are emerging from the mere material scuffle; you—with your something-for-nothing crowd—are heading for the thick of it. We shall buy up your beauty. I can see England becoming like the Italy of the seventeenth century, an antique shop, bric-a-brac, a little subsidized show-country, parasitic and picturesque."

She laughed gently.

"Just that."

Bonthorn said: "I wonder."

She observed him for a moment; he was staring at the moat with that one very blue eye. His face had a fierceness. She spoke.

"Come and see Isabeau. She has most exquisite lavender standards, and claret-coloured falls. And the phloxes."

He came out of his strained reverie.

"Yes—I expect your phloxes have eel worm. That's serious."

II

Shelp and young Tanrock had remained on the bridge at Monks Lacey, for the conciliation of Mrs. Buck had been unexpected, and though Rhoda and Rachel had every right to console the old lady, youth saw no reason why it should be balked.

"May as well wait till they come back."

Tanrock had agreed. If he desired Rhoda he did not desire her as Shelp desired Rachel, purely for himself and like a glutton with a dish of delicacies. His association with Shelp was fortuitous, and if a magnanimous but shy ardour in him resented Shelp's too familiar splurges, that was somehow to his credit.

For Shelp had proposed to speak with gross intimacy on certain matters, and young Tanrock had gone hot.

"O, shut up."

"You're one of the sentimental kids, Fred."

"I don't keep a butcher's shop."

Inevitably there had been a pause, a constricted silence, while Shelp sulked, and the fair boy watched the water for possible fish. Shelp's sallowness sulked easily, but not for long. He was too full of what young Tanrock would have described as hot air. You might deflate the fellow for five minutes, but like the perpetual gasbag that he was he would recover his turgidity and bump against you. A disconcerting, uneasy devil, like a fellow on a soap-box spluttering and declaiming and raging about revolution. He could not let things alone. He possessed a kind of malignant and glib speciousness.

Shelp, with his fat thighs pressed against the parapet of the old bridge, was sighting Stella Lacey. He could distinguish the tops of the cedars, two high chimneys, a Jacobean gable, and even as Stella Lacey had looked at the Mill House, so—Stanley Shelp observed Stella Lacey. It offended him. There were glutinous movements of his fat back, a kind of angry squirming.

He pointed with the stem of a pipe.

"We've got to pull that sort of thing to pieces."

Tanrock, head in air, eyed him mistrustfully.

"What sort of thing?"

"Why—that. Pirated property. That park."

"What's the matter with Stella Lacey?"

"Matter? That sort of thing's going to be smashed."

So, the fellow was off again, and Tanrock, who had seen Shelp try to play football and lose his temper, egged on the argument.

"What for?"

Shelp sucked the stem of his pipe. He had moments of turgid emotion, silences, bursts of hysterical truculence.

"My father was a butler in a house like that. Supercilious, superior swine. Gentlefolk!"

Yes, Shelp was off again.

"But all that is going sky-high. We know things—now. We know where the money is, and we know how to get it. Call us tax-mongers, do they? We're their bosses, we reds in the offices.

Let 'em talk about putting their money out of the country. We're ready for that game. We shall have 'em all marked and locked up till they disgorge."

Tanrock looked bored.

"There's not much money in Stella Lacey."

"Yes, but we'll have the land. We'll have the old woman out of it. All those damned trees."

"What'll you grow, radishes?"

Shelp seemed to swallow.

"Swine! With their parks and their pictures and their patronage. But they're finished. We've got 'em cold. We're going to make a new England——"

He was very much off, high on the soap-box, but young Tanrock, whose father had evolved the most prosperous business of its kind in the neighbourhood out of a back-street cycle shop, had other views. He was shy but shrewd. If England fell to the soap-boxes and the Shelps——! And Stanley caught him smiling.

"What's the joke?"

"Hot air! You're just like a balloon, old lad, with a fellow scattering pink pamphlets."

Shelp's sulkiness returned.

"O, you're a toff in the making, are you! Sir Frederick Tanrock!"

Tanrock laughed.

"What price Sir Stanley Shelp? I'm going in to have a talk with old Prodgers. He's a card."

"That old pill pedlar! Why can't you be serious? That's the whole trouble with this damned country. It's got too much grin."

"Supposing we are made that way? Try Russia, old chap. Grow a beard and bite it."

Hands in pockets he went off whistling, unseriously serious, and provocatively English in his sanguine tolerance.

III

The car had returned, with Mrs. Binnie somewhat appeased, and reassured as to youth's recklessness.

Mrs. Buck, descending at the gate, looked a little blown about but proud.

"Well—we're car folk."

Rachel was opening the door of the wagon shed which the car was to share with the lumbering superfluities of Mrs. Buck's past. Her daughters complained that she collected everything and shed nothing, and amid the amazing clutter Wilfred came to rest. Here were boxes full of feathers, a derelict mangle, a discarded iron bedstead, oddments of china, rolls of rusty wire netting, piles of wastepaper, a broken screen, two obsolete gas-stoves and a wheelbarrow that had lost its wheel. Confronted with the contents of the shed Mrs. Buck's mind equivocated.

"If you throw a thing away you'll always find you want it tomorrow."

The key was turned upon the car. The red van had not yet removed itself to "The Chequers" at Lignor. In the tea-room Mr. Prodgers was sitting astride a chair, looking pawky and sly. Shelp had the whole of the fireplace to himself and was straddling a grievance. Young Tanrock was fiddling with the gramophone.

"Well—Mrs. Binnie, broken any records?"

Rhoda betrayed a certain abruptness.

"Hallo, you two still here?"

She looked at young Tanrock, and Tanrock jerked a thumb in the direction of Shelp.

"Stanley's lecturing us."

"He would."

Mrs. Binnie sat down with the air of a woman who had experienced something. Rhoda joined young Tanrock by the gramophone. Rachel, with a glance at Shelp, diverged towards the kitchen door, but with a kind of oily glide he intercepted her. His right arm was familiar and insinuating, but she edged him off.

"Well—there's something to be said for wheels."

Mrs. Binnie removed her hat.

"And in spite of the police one's not breaking any of the commandments."

Mr. Prodgers made an alert little movement on his chair.

"Commandments! That's a coincidence. We've been having an argument here. Mr. Shelp's point of view."

"What's that, Sam?"

"Why, that the whole ten of them are obsolete, so to speak. But the joke is——"

Rhoda pirouetted.

"I bet I know. You couldn't remember them. Own up."

"Well, not all of them."

"Not even Stanley——"

"Mr. Shelp was a little vague."

"O, Mr. Infallible!"

There was no love wasted between Rhoda and Stanley Shelp, and if Rhoda disliked him it was not because he preferred her sister. She understood his preference for Rachel, for Rachel was softer, more like a grape to Rhoda's more acid sloe. And if Rhoda had a little mocking, bright-eyed devil in her that could refer to the clerk as "Mr. Yelp," and pinch him until he began to exude his characteristic sour juices—well—that was life.

She turned on the gramophone, and nudged Tanrock.

"Let's get Stanley yelping."

In a minute there was clamour, with Mr. Prodggers treating his chair like a rocking-horse, an exultant philosopher. The orator had rushed to the challenge. He lost his temper. Tanrock began to laugh, and like many shy lads—when once his laughter was launched, it became joyous and immoderate. Rhoda did steps in front of Shelp. The gramophone squirmed "Blue Eyes." Mrs. Buck, half shocked, and half amused, exclaimed at intervals: "Well—really!"

Stanley Shelp was on his soap-box.

"I never make a statement unless I am sure of my figures."

"Well—ten, Stanley, ten. I'll hear you. Commandment No. 1?"

"He's forgotten."

"Something about God, isn't it?"

Shelp, almost shouting: "God's an obsolete abstraction. We've got rid of Mumbo-Jumbo."

Mrs. Buck with hands up: "Well—really! Mr. Shelp, how can you say such things!"

A fat voice from the gramophone—"Blue Eyes—I call you Blue Eyes——"

Rhoda, still doing steps, irony on its toes, appealed to the professor.

"Stanley's forgotten most of them. I expect he knows the seventh. What is the second commandment, professor?"

"I'm ashamed to say—I've forgotten."

There was general clamour, with the gramophone shouting—"Blue Eyes, I call you Blue Eyes." Shelp, very pale and slightly clammy, lost the remnants of his temper. He too began to shout.

"All right, all right. I'll contradict the lot for you. There is no God. We make a graven image of money. No one keeps the Sabbath; we don't honour our fathers and mothers. All capitalists steal and commit murder. The police bear false witness——"

The gramophone squawked itself out, and Tanrock, laughing, attended to it. Mrs. Buck covered her ears. Mr. Samuel made exultant movements in his chair.

"Splendid—splendid! Bang go all the tables of the Law."

"Really. Mr. Shelp, really! It's blaspheming."

And suddenly Shelp's rage grew sullen.

"O, all right. You people can't be serious. What I am giving you is the new gospel, and I'm giving it you hot and strong. It's the gospel of the new world. All the old, middle-class Christian stuff is as dead as the Czar. What about the sexual seventh? We don't commit adultery these days. We do what's natural. We've got rid of all the nasty, fly-blown humbug about purity. We——"

Mrs. Buck stood up suddenly, looking fluffed and combative like an incensed bird.

"Mr. Shelp—that's enough! It's—it's disgraceful. I won't have such things said before my girls."

The professor applauded her, with mischievous and spectacted eyes focusing Shelp.

"The new morality—what!"

But it was Rachel—Rachel darkly in the background—who first saw Nicholas Bonthorn standing in the doorway with something white and dirty in his arms.

Chapter Five

I

THAT dirty object was a small, rough-haired dog, and on Bonthorn's face fierceness and pity were in conflict. He looked taller than himself, a bronze figure with one blue and vivid eye.

He spoke.

"Excuse me, have you any water? I found this poor little beggar in the road. A car—of course. The people in it hadn't stopped"—and quite gently he finished with a "Damn them."

Was it that he looked intuitively at Rachel, or was it that Rachel being the most sensitive of the six was the first to move? Her eyes were wide open. They had looked at Bonthorn's face and at the dog, and again at the face of the man. She said nothing. She seemed to glide away into the kitchen, and to return with a saucer of water. The whole room was on its feet, its noisy rag forgotten in this minor tragedy. Only Shelp stood apart, sullen and ironic.

Rachel put her saucer on the floor by one of the windows. She snatched a cushion from a chair.

"O, poor little thing."

"I'm afraid his back's broken."

"How horrible."

The dog was *in extremis*, and as Bonthorn knelt and laid the little beast on the cushion, Rachel's eyes watched his hands.

"O, you're bleeding."

"He bit me—when I picked him up. Dogs do sometimes—when they are in anguish. It's nothing."

Mrs. Binnie, agitated and shocked, sat down in a chair behind her elder daughter.

"O—I can't bear to see things suffer."

The professor made sympathetic noises. Young Tanrock, looking angry, stood and frowned. "The swine, not to stop!" Shelp

glowered in the background. Rhoda, her straight black eyebrows rather stern, crossed the room and closed the door.

Rachel, on her knees and trying to persuade the dying dog to drink, became somehow the room's central figure. Bonthorn was on one knee beside her, like a lean Bayard after a battle. And old Prodgers remembered him. You did not forget a face like Bonthorn's, the tan and the temper of it made more vivid by the black patch over the empty socket. It was the face of a man who had suffered much, and yet was happy, and in whom some spiritual mystery endured.

Rachel withdrew the saucer.

"He can't drink."

"I'm afraid he's too far gone."

"Poor—poor poppet."

Gently she stroked the dog's dirty coat.

"I don't think he feels now."

Her arm touched Bonthorn's.

"No."

But someone was out of the picture, the one person in the room who wanted to be in the centre of the picture, always and all the time. That—perhaps—was part of the new morality. Stanley Shelp's voice was heard, and its sneer was unexpected.

"Can't you see the dog's dead?"

And before anyone could respond to the challenge, he had added:

"That's England all over. Getting sentimental about dogs and daffodils, and not caring a damn——"

Bonthorn seemed to come to his full height in one swift movement.

"I beg your pardon——"

His one urge was a thing of sudden and solitary fierceness. It picked out Shelp instantly and fixed him.

"I don't think anyone else here agrees with you."

But the voice and the glance were so final, and Shelp's sallowness seemed to grow turgid. It was as though he had been thrown quietly and emphatically upon the floor, and had got up hot and raging.

"That's all right, Bonthorn, it's my privilege to disagree."

"Probably—you do."

Someone laughed, and the sharp, wholesome sound was like a clip across Shelp's ear. His head went back with a jerk. That flabby and voluble mouth of his began to utter things.

"I don't want any superior lip from you——"

Rhoda settled him.

"Shut up—Mr. Bolshie."

The crudeness of Shelp subsided. He found a hat and disappeared, and no one appeared to notice his absence. Bonthorn had forgotten him after those first whipping words, and was down on one knee again, with a hand laid gently on the dog's body. He nodded.

"All over."

Rachel was looking at him, and with a suggestion of inevitableness he turned his head and met her eyes, and for a second or two the glance between them held.

She rose. She was aware of Bonthorn picking up the dead dog. He was on his feet, and with a curious, inward smile he seemed to forget them all for a moment. Then he faced Mrs. Binnie.

"Thank you. It was good of you to let me bring the dog in. I hope I haven't——"

Mrs. Binnie nodded her small head. It was obvious that she liked Mr. Bonthorn and liked him very well.

"I wish we could have done more. I've seen you pass my place so often, sir."

He smiled at Mrs. Binnie.

"This little fellow has introduced us—apparently. I hope he was merry. Sad dogs shouldn't be. And now—if you will excuse me—I will go and bury him."

Mrs. Binnie offered her garden for the purpose, but Bonthorn's whim was for Yew End.

"I have a corner up there. I have a dog and a cat buried in it, and a tame crow who died of swallowing buttons. Thank you, all of you."

His blue eyes travelled from face to face. He exchanged smiles with Mr. Prodgers of the red van. Young Tanrock went to open the door for him.

"Thank you."

If necessary, young Tanrock would have opened more doors

for him, and when man and dog had disappeared there was a silence, a kind of inward dispersion of the presences that remained. Young Tanrock went and closed the lid of the gramophone. Rachel picked up the saucer and carried it carefully into the kitchen. Rhoda collected the cushion, dusted it, and returned it to its chair. Mr. Samuel refilled his pipe. Robinia nodded her head approvingly at Rhoda's lover.

"That's right, Fred—that's quite right of you."

Mr. Prodgers, removing the mouthpiece of his pipe, blew down it.

"Bit of an original—that. And a gentleman. Makes you feel—somehow——"

Rhoda, with a dark straightness of brow and a lift of the head, seemed to reflect for a moment.

"That bladder of lard—Stanley. He hung him up on a hook—all right."

Young Tanrock gave a little laugh.

"Bladder of lard! Marvellous. That's it—absolutely it."

II

Bonthorn followed the lane. A few sprays of honeysuckle were out, and the buds of a wild rose showed points of crimson. The growth was deep and green below the hedges, vetch, sheep's parsley, wild garlic, pimpernel, cleavers, and the grasses. He carried the dead dog as he would have carried a baby, its four paws tucked up, its eyes closed. He felt pity for this dead thing, for the creature that had ceased from all doggy delights, sniffings and adventures and tail waggings and the exploring of hedgerows. Rats. And those people had not stopped after breaking this little mongrel's back.

Life in a hurry, the magniloquence of the machine, the mere sottishness of speed. Changed rhythms for the multitude, this strange age with its nose in a newspaper and its legs under a tank. Yet the grasses of the field were the same, and bees hung to the florets of the clover, and the briar burned in the green tangle, and the sun moved from equinox to solstice.

And those people at the Mill House, the nice lad who had opened the door for him, the girl with the compassionate eyes,

old Prodders of the Pills, Mrs. Robinia rather like a thrush. If they had a newness, they were all as old as time, perhaps without knowing it. Yes, the obdurate Martha—full of her pots and pans—was too quick to discover Magdalenes. Possibly the bee accused the butterfly of flightiness.

He entered the white gate in the yew hedge. A tawny shape rushed at him, paused, turned a head from side to side, whimpered. What was this white thing, this brother or rival?

Bonthorn spoke to the dog.

"Gently—gently. No fuss."

He laid the dead thing on the grass under the cherry tree, and the Cairn, nervous and troubled, sniffed at it, and whimpered. From somewhere appeared Thomas the black cat, the patriarch not the kitten, brushed against Bonthorn's legs, and then delivered a strange and unexpected gesture. The cat stalked softly and solemnly to the dead dog, put out a paw, and patted the white jowl. Almost—it was a caress.

Bonthorn stood stock-still, his blue eye pleased. The unexpectedness of animals! What moved them? The soft and surprising pat of a paw. He picked up the cat and snuggled his chin into the black fur.

"Gentleman—Thomas. I love you."

He went for a spade. That oddity—old Osgood his gardener—had gone home with a scythe over his shoulder and his gnome's face under an old straw hat, a "gent's boater." Bonthorn found a spade hanging from a nail in the tool-house with its old red roof. In a wild corner just above the orchard where foxgloves grew among the stools of hazels Bonthorn had a little graveyard. In the autumn squirrels hid nuts here; in the spring it was yellow with primroses and green with dogs mercury. Bonthorn dug his grave beside that of Tabitha, a cat.

The dead dog had no collar, and his grave would be nameless, but those other animals attended the funeral, Thomas walking tail in air, Rollo trotting gravely. It was a ceremony. The cat sat solemnly and watched with yellow eyes, while the Cairn, stretched on his tummy, kept turning a head and blinking. Bonthorn laid the dead dog in the grave with a foxglove like a spire at its head. He filled in the soil and patted it gently with the spade.

"Requiescat in pace."

Thomas looked at him intently, rose, licked himself, and walked daintily away.

Bonthorn rested a foot on the spade and meditated. The dog watched him. A blackbird perched, peered, and winged off into the orchard. Up the valley the Stella Lacey clock struck three deep, distant notes.

III

Mr. Producers parked the red van in a corner of Lignor market-place. Opposite him he had the white portico and stolid front of the "George Inn," on his right flank a hardware stall, and on his left, a stall that sold Lignor Rock, though the sweetstuff was no more sacred to Lignor than it was to London.

Life was not growing any more easy either for Lignor or Mr. Samuel, for though Lignor continued to be a market town and an agricultural centre, it was becoming hybridized, and like much of provincial England living upon an exchange of washing. It was suffering from the usual eruption of bungalows and small villas: "Baroda"—"Two Oaks"—"Heather Croft"—"My Corner," the names have a universality. At every exit to the town, petrol pumps stood like red sentinels. Mr. Tanrock's new garage was all reinforced concrete and plate glass, with a central and welcoming notice—"Drive right in." The old red brick of Lignor had become a core about which much highly-coloured pulp had accumulated. Everybody said that the shacks and huts on the Downs road were a disgrace, but nobody did anything about it. Nor could anything be done with the torrent of traffic that hooted and roared through Lignor on Sundays. Attempts were being made to short-circuit the nuisance.

In the Abbey church—Canon Woolgarth, who was original and a man of some passion—had opened a sermon with the words:

"The Lord's Day—Lout's Day, Litter Day, detonations, hootings, smells!"

If Lignor was suffering the pangs of progress, so was Mr. Producers. The police were growing more autocratic and less sweet-tempered. The public, while continuing credulous in its attitude towards the Press and to the proprietary preparations advertised therein, found him and his pills less persuasive and plausible. He

had to contend with new drifts, Mothers' Welfare Centres, cash-chemists, a young generation that knew everything, or thought it did. He had modernized his show and his propaganda. Electromagnetic! Give "Little Mary" a shock. His van flashed lights and emitted cracklings, but business was not quite what it had been.

Mr. Prodgers was a laughing philosopher, and a student of faces, and when darkness descended and lights were lit, the red van became more truly a temple of magic. Also, the other hucksters had had their day, and were packing up, leaving a wilderness of wastepaper, straw, and broken boxes to be dealt with by the Lignor sanitary squad. The public, having completed its business, was in a mood to loiter, listen and be amused, and Mr. Prodgers knew that it is fatal to bore your public.

"Ladies and gentlemen, electricity is life."

The side of the van let down, forming a platform upon which Mr. Prodgers strutted up and down nicely "smokered" as to the upper man. He wore his top hat at an angle, but the lower part of him lapsed into grey flannel trousers. In one hand he held a silver megaphone, in the other a white wand.

"My pills, ladies and gentlemen, are subjected to a process which I claim to be one of the epoch-making discoveries of the century. Drugs! Dead stuff. Some hotch-potch in a bottle. But electrify your drug, ladies and gentlemen, and the drug is a different article. That's my discovery. Observe!"

Then, with jocund emphasis and some back-chat, he would demonstrate the process, a complex of wires and lights and long glass tubes in which were wads of coloured wool. He would pour a handful of pills into one of the tubes, turn on the current, and cause cracklings and flashings.

"That's what you get inside you. No, not quite such a thunderstorm. No forked lightning. My pills are powerful persuaders—but they are gentlemen, sirs, gentlemen."

Mr. Prodgers studied faces. It was necessary. He had to appraise his public, to distinguish the possible patron from the incipient heckler. In every society there exists the Marxian mind, the fanatical, interfering egoist who cannot let life have it, either its pill or its joke. Mr. Prodgers kept a sharp look out for such political faces. He had a particular method of getting back at such people.

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"I'll present you with a free box of my pills, sir, but if the test is to be positive—I must ask you to take a pill in public, and sit down for half an hour in this chair."

Yes, he had had one or two prodigious triumphs, in which the subsequent and sudden disappearance of the experimenter had electrified the crowd. An emetic pill kept for phenomenal occasions!

On this Thursday night Mr. Prodgers saw a face. It was a little hairy face with twinkling eyes under an immense bowler hat. The twinkling eyes watched him intently, and Mr. Prodgers was on the alert.

"Rheumatism, dyspepsia, constipation——"

The little man with the hat edged nearer and nearer. He was none other than Mr. John Osgood, Bonthorn's gnome. He waited. He had an air of confidential slyness.

Mr. Prodgers tackled him.

"I think you are interested, sir."

Yes, Mr. Osgood was interested. He stood in close to the stage, and putting a curved hand to his mouth, whispered:

"Did you say constipation?"

Mr. Prodgers had said so.

"Most certainly."

"My old woman, she grouts and grouts. I'd like to give she a shock."

Mr. Prodgers's spectacles were solemn.

"You mean——?"

"If she must talk about some'at, I'd like she to have some'at to talk about."

"I have a special pill. If your good lady takes one a night, I can guarantee——"

"How much?"

"One and threepence the box. Twenty-four pills to a box."

"I'll have 'un. One—you said?"

"Yes, not more than one."

Mr. Osgood went home with his box, but being a gnome with sundry grievances he was not quite candid with his wife. He told her to take three pills. She should have some'at actual to grout about.

But that was not the professor's adventure. He had one of his

own on that Thursday night. Someone threw a tomato at him from the dark passage leading to the "George's" side entrance. Whose was the malignant or mischievous hand? Mr. Prodgers never knew, but the shot was a good one, and the fruit splashed upon his shirt-front.

But he had a quick and jocund temper.

"Thank you, sir, thank you. Will anyone throw a bunch of flowers? True blue's my colour."

Yet, the incident depressed him. Shirt-fronts were precious, and he was his own laundryman. Definitely he had felt pilloried, insulted. Some boy, possibly? But he suspected the "George," and even the local chemist, for no chemists loved him. Professional jealousy!

At the end of the evening when he put the red van away in the "Chequers" yard and went into the private bar to have a drink an old acquaintance hailed him. Mr. Prodgers had put his van up at the "Chequers" for the best part of twenty years, though it could not be said that he put himself up there. He slept and mealed in his van.

"Hallo, Sam, on the old round. Have one with me?"

The professor was thirsty after three hours of oratory.

"Thanks. I could do with a drink."

"Hallo! Who's blooded your shirt?"

"Someone threw a tomato."

"It hit you?"

"It—sure—did."

There was laughter, and Mr. Prodgers joined in it. If you live on the crowd you should be careful to laugh with it.

"Fact is, Prof, you've missed the boat. You ought to be going round in that old van of yours sprouting Bolshie stuff. It's the right colour."

"So was the tomato, my dear sir. I'm thinking of painting my van blue. Any of you gentlemen got a match?"

And in return for the drink and their sympathy he told them the tale of old Osgood who wanted his dear woman to experience reality so that she might have something evidential to talk about. Sam Prodgers could tell a tale very well, and when the room had had its laugh, he threw in his pinch of philosophy.

"Something accomplished, something done, gentlemen. What

the world wants is results. You could go and spend fifty guineas in Harley Street and get nothing but a gilt-edged diagnosis. I wouldn't mind betting that I've had as good results. And why? Because I can put a joke inside a pill. Get 'em laughing, get 'em laughing."

He drank.

"But—mind you—there must be some stuff behind the laugh. My pills aren't hocus-pocus. No, sir. I'd back them even against Carter's and Beecham's for the Derby—any day."



Chapter Six

I

IN THE meadows a tenuous mist clung about the pollards. A full moon was rising, tawny and huge above the trees of Stella Lacey, and pencilling upon the parkland slopes etchings of light and of shadow. The road was silent, and the water falling at the weir had the silence to itself.

Rachel stood for a moment on the bridge. She looked at the moon, at the high mysteries of Stella Lacey, at the veiled trees, at the water that fell and yet was ever the same. She turned and crossed the bridge, and saw the lane to Beech Farm full of the moonlight between the hush of its hedges. Up its centre ran a ribbon of bare soil where the hoofs of the farm horses trod, then two deep wheel-ruts, and outside these stretches of dewy grass. Both lane and river followed the valley, but the lane climbed gradually along the flank of the hill like a strand of pale light losing itself in the shadows of the woods.

Rachel followed the lane. A rabbit feeding in the turf scurried from her feet. From one of the hedges a drift of perfume touched her face like a spirit hand, and she paused to breathe it in, but in a moment the elusive scent had vanished. She idled on, and coming to that open space where the Beech Farm gate closed the lane she saw the holly hedge of Yew End. A great beech tree threw a wide shadow here, but in the blackness of the holly hedge she saw that other gate, six white slats shining in the moonlight.

Why had she come here? But on such a night did one ask questions, or try to sort out the strands of wayward impulses? Life might be just such a tangle as one of those hedgerows, thorn, briar rose, honeysuckle, maple. A dog barked for a few seconds and was still. Was it that someone had been expected at the Mill House, someone whom suddenly she was avoiding with a little shudder of fastidiousness? Common clay.

She went to the farm gate, climbed it, and perched herself

on the top rail. She found herself looking at the beech tree, and noticing how little burrs of moonlight stippled the dense foliage. She was conscious of its stillness, and of one streak of light slanting through and touching the ground. Her mood was not analytical; it was more a mirror in which were reflected the mysteries of this June night, reflections that were the responses of a child. A part of the holly hedge was in shadow, a part of it glistened. Close to the gate, bracken spread itself.

Old One Eye!

But she had ceased to think of him as Old One Eye. He was Mr. Nicholas Bonthorn, a man with a dying dog in his arms, and somehow more than man. He suggested a fairy tale. She could imagine him in a green coat and curiously peaked cap with little bells that shivered. He belonged here. He was not of the road or the shop. Fantastic? But more than that. He had touched her imagination.

She wondered. Her glances could not penetrate that hedge. She could not know that he was sitting there under the cherry tree with a black cat on his knees, and that he had heard her footsteps. His hearing was like a bird's.

He heard other footsteps before they were audible to her. They belonged to some solid creature who was cautiously ascending the lane. Occasionally there was a break in the rhythm of the approach. The man stood still and listened. His pauses were purposeful.

Rachel swung a foot from side to side. She was watching the moon swimming above the valley. Her face had a vacant, pale serenity. She was visible to the man. She was not aware of his nearness or its significance until he spoke.

"Hallo! Star-gazing? What!"

She was startled. She sat poised for a moment, and then slid down off the gate, and stood with her back to it.

"What do you want?"

He was in the moonlight, and his figure threw a squat shadow.

"Guess, can't you? I've done some guessing."

She was silent, and her silence challenged him.

"Got a fit of the sentimentals! Marvellous!"

Bonthorn, rising from his chair and putting the black cat on the ground, seemed to hesitate between the white gate and the

cottage. If these two were lovers he had no wish to be elected listener-in. Confound them! Why couldn't they go elsewhere? And was every green backwater and cul-de-sac to become a corner for the embraces of the casual crowd on wheels? But the man's voice had seemed familiar, and he hesitated.

He heard the girl say: "Why did you follow me up here?"

This time he recognized her voice, and was held by something sensitive and unsure in it.

"Curiosity, my dear. I suppose you sneaked up here to vamp the dog fellow."

Bonthorn's head went up. He waited. He was conscious of a startled suspense. Was she of the same crude flesh as that aggressive, confident cad?

Her answer came: "I'm here to look at the moon. I don't want you here. I'm alone—with myself."

That should have been final, but he heard Shelp's voice, complacent and cozening, like the caress of a fat hand.

"Bit moody, kid? That's all right. Come and sit on the gate and be sentimental."

"O, don't be an idiot."

"Come on, Rachel, come on."

Bonthorn moved towards the gate. He was hearing those two voices, and the suggestions of a struggle, something breathless and disturbing, and again he stood still. What business was it of his? But in him there was a little knot of anger. Just how serious were they, and how much was he a listening fool? Two blackbirds scuffling in a hedge, but one of them cried out, and the note had the poignancy of fear. The two voices contended like birds.

"Let go——"

"Come on, kid; you know you want it just as much as I do."

"O, get away——"

"Don't be a little fool. Everybody does it these days."

"You beast."

Bonthorn went to the white gate in the holly hedge, and stood there in the shadow. He was less surprised by the sudden flare of his fierceness than by the unexpectedness of the words that came into his head. He uttered them.

"Christ is risen."

II

There was silence. Hidden in that deep cleft in the hedge Bonthorn could see and not be seen, but for the moment he could distinguish nothing but the moonlit grass, the beech tree and its shadow, and the outline of the field-gate. Then a figure drifted to the gate, and leaning upon it with arms spread, gave him the impression of breathlessness.

The other figure became visible, something dark attached to the shadow of the tree. Two hands showed, but the face was very dim. For a moment the silence continued.

Then, Bonthorn was out in the moonlight, head up, shoulders rigid. When he spoke his voice had a scathing gentleness, though the words were molten metal.

"Get out—you foul thing."

There was a kind of little moaning sound from the gate, and from the beech tree something snarled.

"You go to hell. No bloody business of yours. She's just a little animal."

Bonthorn said nothing. He went straight towards that other shape, with a purpose that was self-evident and inexorable. They met in the full moonlight, and the girl, turning a head for a moment, watched them from the gate. The shorter, thicker figure crouched and rushed, seemed to meet some impact and to flounder back into the shadow. Then—two crisp blows following each other, heavy breathing, a rustling of dead beech leaves.

She heard Bonthorn's voice, sharp and fierce.

"Get up! Get up and clear out!"

She turned again to the gate, her face towards the meadows and the woods about Beech Farm. She seemed to hang there, a little dazed by those sudden physical happenings. The bar of the gate threw a sharp shadow on the grass, and Bonthorn's fierceness had just such a sharp edge. She had been strangely thrilled by it.

Never a word from Shelp. She did not look round and see the slouch of his retreat, or the dabbing handkerchief. She had an idea that Bonthorn followed him down the lane, like a wolfhound making sure of the exit of some mongrel. The man with cap and bells! And what—exactly—did he think her to be? A

little animal! She was angry with both of them and with herself. She was a little animal, but cleanly so, and more than a mere body. It was as though Shelp had torn her dress open, and Bonthorn had seen her naked.

He was coming back. She heard his footsteps, and her whole body stiffened. He stopped somewhere behind her.

"I'm sorry."

Her rigidity shivered. Why should he be sorry? She clutched the gate, and was mute.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper. One shouldn't do that."

He was apologizing to her! She wanted to laugh, but this impulse towards laughter was emotion masquerading in motley. Something in her felt humiliated, resentful, mocking.

"O, that's all right. You heard what he said."

She felt his silence like a tense thread.

"I suppose you might conclude that if I hadn't been—rather like what he called me, he wouldn't have——"

She waited. She put her mouth to one of her wrists, and bit it. His response surprised her.

"Was it true—what you said?"

"What was that?"

"Your coming out to be with—yourself."

Her head lifted sharply.

"Yes, quite true. I suppose even a little animal can come out to play in the moonlight."

His voice had a reflective drift.

"Yes, animals and fairies. They are rather alike. And there are some flowers that open at night, the flowers that moths visit. And perhaps the happy ghosts of dead dogs."

A sudden sound surprised him. She was in tears, and he stood and looked at her with a kind of shocked wonder. Had he made her cry, and how? Had she a fondness for that slimy, sensual cad? Was it possible that her nay——?

He fumbled. He called her by name.

"Miss Buck—I'm most terribly sorry. I've hurt you—somehow——"

She twisted from the gate.

"Yes; you have. You think I'm just——"

"I?"

"Yes; you do. You're just saying nice things to me. You think——"

His grip came back.

"My dear child—that's not true. I'm sorry this happened, and yet I'm glad. You came out to look for—what? Yes, just what? Sometimes we don't know, do we? Some little fellow on a toadstool, not a toadstool like that—cad."

He was very near to her. He touched her shoulder.

"If you can be a bit of a kid, so can I. You're just a little shocked and angry with things—with me. Yes, I understand that. I'm going to walk down the lane with you. Shall we go?"

She consented, and was mute. She walked down the middle of the lane between the ruts, he—on the grass verge. They did not utter a word, though once or twice she made a little, moist sound. And just beyond the bridge, he stopped and stood still.

"Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Bonthorn."

He walked back over the bridge, and she sat down on the bench under the chestnut tree. She could not go in until her dishevelled, secret self had tidied itself up.

III

She could hear the gramophone playing dance-music, and before showing herself to her mother and her sister she looked in through one of the windows. Supposing her over-confident, bullying lover had sneaked in to show his wounds and tell a tale? But that was not very likely, and as she stood there in the shadow of the tree she felt as she had never felt before about men, or about that sort of man. Pawing, slobbering beasts! Not that she was unaware of those passionate urges that are locked up no longer in secret cupboards, but like a cat she felt that she would wish to keep the body of her passion clean for the man to whom she could give it.

That beast! The insolent assumption that she——!

She looked in, and saw Rhoda, turning over old records. Her mother, spectacles on nose, was reading the daily paper. Mrs. Binnie's lips moved, for when she discovered some item that interested her, she could not keep it to herself. She would read out

a whole paragraph, though her daughters said: "Yes, mother," with the tolerance due to a child.

Moreover, Mrs. Binnie's items of interest were so unexpected.

"Unfrocked priest married in mid-ocean. Well—really!"

She liked her head-lines well emphasized so that her own particular protest could come out pat.

Rachel went in. No creature could have looked more casual. She locked the door, put up a hand to a yawning mouth, and had an eye for the clock.

"Any news——?"

Her mother glanced at her anxiously, but asked no questions. She was discovering the uselessness of asking her daughters questions.

"Buns are coming in again."

"Then you'll be in the fashion, mumsie."

Rhoda put on a record and wound the handle.

"Did you see Stanley? He put his head in here."

Rachel yawned.

"Yes. I'm bored with Stanley. I sent him home."

Mrs. Binnie nodded.

"I don't like that young man. He's much too——"

Rhoda supplied the word.

"Too Shelpish. Nasty bit of work. Don't mind me being candid, Rachie."

"I don't. Supposing we leave it at that. I'm sleepy; I'm going to turn in."

The conversion of the Mill House to the religion of progress had left the wheel and machinery intact, but Mrs. Binnie had managed to transmute the big store-room into bedrooms. The mill-wheel and the grinding plant were curiosities and so was that black oubliette under the floor where water dripped and trickled. Even the world on wheels sometimes liked to look at this other wheel, and to discover how England came by its flour before the days of steel rollers, elevators and cheap trans-Atlantic transport. The mill as a mill was part of Mrs. Binnie's stock-in-trade, like the "Ye" on her notice boards. Also, those improvised bedrooms were let on occasions to the right sort of people, married couples preferred, and neither too old nor too young. Children were not accepted. Mrs. Binnie liked her boarders to be of

the order of chastity, decent creatures who went for country walks, and were vaguely interested in the picturesque and the historic, and who would take out light lunches and visit Hurst Castle and Hartfield Abbey. Once a month the grounds of Stella Lacey were open to the world.

But the new promiscuity left Mrs. Binnie cold. In spite of the tolerance of her daughters she would have nothing to do with those sports-model people, adventurous week-enders out to share a sensation. It might all be very rational and natural, but she had not been brought up that way. She was her own censor where too much leg and lipstick suggested the new candour.

"They can go up to the 'George.' I'm not going to be mixed up in their affairs."

She called such couples "French Honeymooners," having the conventional English idea of morality across the Channel. Her obstinacy in such matters was eloquent and emphatic.

Rhoda might argue—"After all—it's nothing to do with us, mater. Most people are like that these days. If a man and a girl want to be natural——"

Mrs. Robinia would not accept the naturalness of this attitude to sex.

"Where would you have been, my dear, if your father and I had been natural? Yes; I know more about it than you think. Doing what you want—without any of the obligations. Children——"

Rhoda might point out that the country was becoming like a fly-paper, and that though children could be regarded as potential realities, sex was a reality.

"We used to call it love, my dear," said her mother. "But then—of course—I'm an old woman. But I won't have these mock marriages in my house. These Hoity-Toities! Reminds me of Humpty Dumpty, and all the King's Horses and all the King's men. I dare say they would like to sneak in here because they don't have to register, but I'm not having any, so there."

Incidentally, the interior complexities of the Mill House made Rachel's going to bed an affair of many steps and the carrying of a candle. She had chosen to lodge herself in one of the attics of the old house, because it pleased her, and did not open its window on the road. A generation ago the young of her order would have spoken of this attic as "Quaint" or "Picturesque," but Rachel's

adjectives were less facetiously self-conscious, perhaps because her generation was more conscious of the realities and less affected by imaginary refinements. She was neither very secretive nor sentimental. She liked to be physically clean, and her inwardness corresponded with that prejudice. She and her sister had insisted upon a bath-room, though the plumbing had had to be dispensed with, and hot water carried to it by hand.

She shut the door, put her candle on the chest of drawers and went to the dormer window. It had the cheapest of curtains, but they were full of colour. Rachel liked her colours rich, deep yellows, grass greens, cerise. She stood at the window. She saw the swell of the river and the moonlit meadows and the willows like silver filigree, and the mysterious valley narrowing to the glooms of the high woods. She could distinguish the hedges of the lane, and pick out that great mound of moonlight and of shadow, the beech tree opposite Bonthorn's hedge and gate.

"Christ is risen!"

Almost she reverted to her mother's protest. Well, really! And yet the fantastic and the mystical in that utterance of his had most strangely captured her. Yes, that and his sudden fierceness, his flailing of the sex-monger in Shēlp, and again his sudden gentleness.

But not wholly so. A part of her was angry with him. Are rescued maidens always grateful to the hero who arrives at those raw moments when indiscretions turn up for payment? She had let her fooling with Stanley become a little too casual. Stanley! Beastly name. She should have known—— But then—did one suppose that a man——? No, hardly—— She had undervalued the primitiveness of things.

She was still conscious of flushes of anger, though her fear had passed. She had made a beastly fool of herself before Mr. Nicholas Bonthorn.

Damn Nicholas Bonthorn!

She left the curtains undrawn and proceeded to go to bed.

Chapter Seven

I

BONTHORN received a letter. It was delivered by one of the under-gardeners from Stella Lacey.

"DEAR MR. BONTHORN,

"I am expecting Mr. Cripps on Thursday. He is over here for a month before going on to Germany and Austria. He wants to see your new delphiniums. May I book the afternoon of Friday for him? I have to sit on a committee that afternoon, but I can join you later and in time for five o'clock tea.

"Perhaps you will dine here afterwards? Mr. Cripps will be full of gossip.

"Sincerely yours,

"GLORIANA GURNEY."

The gardener was waiting for an answer, and Bonthorn scribbled a reply, and his fingers impressed upon the paper a faint tinge of earth.

"I shall be delighted. Please excuse the finger-mark. Your man caught me very much at work.

"I should like to show California that England can still produce something. But perhaps that's egotism——"

While up at Lignor Mr. Stanley Shelp was displaying to the world the full beauty of a black eye which promised a procession of autumnal tints. He had been twitted about it. Old Megson, who was his chief, and according to Shelp the most querulous of dotards, had taken the opportunity of improving the occasion. He was on the look out for such occasions, and for any oppor-

tunity of applying caustic to the superabundant proud flesh of his subordinate.

"How did you get that?"

The new dispensation was sulky. It could not tell old Megson to mind his sanguinary business. There were quite a number of people whose dream was to use such language to the Inland Revenue.

"Want it officially?"

Old Megson smiled gloatingly.

"It looks official. The real—authentic article! Almost on His Majesty's Service."

"The other fellow got two copies."

"Did he—indeed? So—you didn't run up against a door. But I shouldn't advertise it too much."

Shelp dealt truculently with a ledger. Obviously, the old fool was trying to be funny, but Mr. Megson with his yellow teeth and acid grin was not the absolute offence. Mr. Megson might and did vote Tory, and express himself with scorn upon the potentialities of the bright young men, those sedulous and aggressive boy bureaucrats who propose to recreate the earth into the likeness of a government department. Mr. Megson could and did talk about camels and straws and geese that laid golden eggs. He was that sort of pantaloon, a pimp for the propertied, but Mr. Megson would die and become dust, and the voluble, wild-haired, consciously inferior young men would possess this planet.

In June Mr. Megson was a rose; in August and September a dahlia. That is to say he would arrive in the office wearing his virtue consciously like a flower, and place it in a glass jar upon his desk. The caretaker had instructions to keep the jar fresh and filled, and had Shelp been a sympathetic and wise creature and tender towards other men's foibles he would have exclaimed: "I say, that's some rose! Where did you get it?" Mr. Megson's smile would have appeared less dusty. "Grew it, my lad. Queen Alexandra. I take off my hat to the rose and the lady." Damned old potterer and sycophant! Growing flowers when there were thrones to be pulled down, and property cut up and distributed like a bloody carcase? That was a man's job, power, passion.

Flowers! That fellow Bonthorn! Sanguinary sentimentalist, but with a most unsentimental fist.

Mr. Megson referred to Bonthorn on that particular morning, perhaps because of the rose he was wearing in contrast to his subordinate's Susan eye.

"Yes, the cutting came from Mr. Bonthorn's place. That's the man I envy. Bit of a wizard."

Shelp grunted.

"Not much use to us, is he? Not much milk there."

Mr. Megson sorted papers.

"Gentleman. Last time he was in here we had a talk. But it doesn't interest you, Shelp. People coming a hundred miles to see flowers."

"Yes—who goes to see slums. Selfish swine——"

"I said—flowers. Next week is Delphinium Day at Yew End. I shall be there."

"Delphinium Day. Sounds like Poppy Day. A six-penny save-your-face—when half the country's starving."

Mr. Megson looked bored.

"Why don't you go and see a doctor, my lad? Sluggish liver. All this sitting."

Shelp spread himself and scribbled, but from the midst of their conversation a suggestion had fluttered and fallen upon the papers like the petal of a flower. Coquelicot, flame-coloured, a little malevolent streak. It remained there with Stanley Shelp all the morning, like a blob of red ink, a provocation. His sensationalism spread itself in gestures after the fashion of the politically minded, and on that June morning he conceived a secret assassination.

At the end of the day he went out and walked, avoiding the highroad to Monks Lacey. His self-regard had put the Mill House out of bounds. He took the Southfield road, and about a mile from Lignor a deep old lane diverged and wandering as it pleased, skirted the woods west of Beech Farm. A path struck off from it, and passing mostly through woodland and along the ridge above Yew End, dropped finally into the Lignor-London road.

Stanley Shelp took that path. He was able to look down from the high woods on Yew End, and to spy out the lie of the land and the linking up of the hedges. He saw a field gate, and another and a smaller gate opening into Bonthorn's orchard. Later there would be a moon.

II

Mr. John Osgood carried a Saxon name, but he belonged to the little people. He should have been a relic of Andred's Wold, some puckish thing out of the primæval past, a creature of the Crock of Gold, no blond, blue-eyed Nordic. His very legs were mischievous, little, toddling pegs in absurd trousers. He wore huge white collars and black ties; his bowler hat was a round barrow, or rather—a big toadstool from under which his little eyes peered and twinkled. He chuckled. He was both malicious and magnanimous, sly and wise, like a child in his tricksiness and his love of display, but in a garden amid the things of the soil he was Puck equipped with passion. The pruning shears and the budding knife seemed to grow out of his hands.

Bonthorn called him "Old Mischief," and mischief he was, but with reservations. The presenting of a box of pills to a valetudinarian partner might be the gesture of a gnome, and no sacrilege—but the thieving of goblin gold—that was another matter. Sacrilege in a garden, some trampling beast, rabbits, boys!

This leprechaun would get out of bed at half-past four in the morning, boil his own kettle and make his own tea, and arrive at Yew End when the world belonged to the birds and the rabbits. Bonthorn was an early riser, but the gnome was part of the dawn. On occasions he would arrive under Bonthorn's bedroom window and chant a little song.

"Did you remember to order the raffia, sir?" *or*

"Slugs have been at Blue Glory."

The soil at Yew End being a heavy loam with a clay subsoil slugs were rampant and unashamed. No birth control appeared to have been instituted in the slug world, and Bonthorn's precious delphiniums had to be ashed early in the year before the first shoots had appeared. The leprechaun waged war on slugdom. On early summer nights a little twinkling light could be seen moving, Osgood with a lantern and a pair of scissors, snipping the succulent thieves in half.

Bonthorn had just opened his eyes when he heard Osgood's voice under his window.

"Mr. Bonthorn, sir—Mr. Bonthorn."

"Hallo."

"There's bin murder."

Bonthorn rolled out of bed.

"Murder! What's the matter, John?"

"All they young delphs, the new hybrids, cut to pieces."

"What!"

"Aye, cut to pieces, murder——"

There was no note of mischief in Osgood's lament, and Bonthorn hurried into shirt and trousers and laced on a pair of shoes. Osgood had disappeared, but Bonthorn found him at the gate of the nursery, the sacred precinct, his fingers busy in his beard.

"Did y'ever see the like? Summun's gone mad in the night."

It was so. The long border in which Bonthorn's precious delphiniums grew looked as though it had been attacked by some insensate yokel with a flail. Those spikes of all shades of blue and mauve and lavender lay flat. Even the stakes had been smashed. It was obvious to Bonthorn that there had been method and deliberation in this sabotage, for the man with the big stick had gone up and down and left not a single clump erect.

He was shocked, not only by the devastation, but by the ugliness of the deed. The spikes had just been coming into flower; they were the children of three years of careful crossing, and some of them were blooming fully for the first time. For days Bonthorn had been watching the flowers open, on the alert for some new and precious prize, something that was nameless but would be named if its glory sufficed. All this work and wonder smashed in an hour by some malicious and merciless fool!

"Incredible!"

Old John watched his face.

"Some enemy hath done this, sir. When I cummed up here and looked over t'gate—I felt like—spewing."

Bonthorn was moving among the dishevelled and flattened spikes. Here and there it might be possible to rescue a flower stalk and set it erect, but most of them had either been pulped or bent and fractured. He searched for one particular plant, a hybrid that had promised to be the year's find, a gorgeous thing of peacock-blue shot over with greens and purples. His one eye gave a gleam. He bent down.

"John, we're in luck."

Old Osgood peered.

"Surely! She's just pushed over. She'll stand——"

"By God, the devil missed our prize! Yes, she's sound. Only one spike too."

He was on his knees feeling the half-prone stem. It lay propped upon a sheaf of other stems.

"Get a stake, John."

Osgood pattered off on his pegs of legs, and came back with a green stake and a hank of bass.

"In here. That's it. Tie while I hold."

Very gently and carefully he raised the year's queen of beauty, and Osgood tied her to the stake.

Bonthorn stood up. His face had a fierceness, and yet he smiled.

"I boasted, John, that I'd show California something. Well, I shall—this—and this——"

His arm swept in a half circle.

"Would anyone believe——? Now, who was it?"

Osgood fingered his beard.

"Who could it be? Just spite. This be'nt mere mischief."

Bonthorn nodded.

"It was done in the night with a heavy stick. The fellow went up and down. Do you see those boot marks?"

The gnome bent double, peering.

"Man's boots. No hobnails. Gent's boots—in a manner of speaking."

And Bonthorn laughed.

"Gent's. Obviously."

Osgood had raised himself to his five feet one inch. He rubbed his hands on the seat of his trousers.

"I'd like to have caught he. I'd like to have had a gun. A dose o' sparrow shot in t'bum. But who could t'chap be?"

He looked at Bonthorn.

"Summat you've said or done, Mr. Bonthorn?"

"I suppose so."

"A slug of a chap."

He watched Bonthorn's face. He guessed that Bonthorn must know who the man might be, but Bonthorn told him nothing.

"We can't prove it, John."

"Them there boot-marks. I'd get the police in. Not that they be much to talk about."

"The police can't mend those broken stems, John."

"That's gospel——"

"We'll look over the crop and see if there is anything else to be saved. Where it's hopeless we'll cut down and mulch, and hope for second spikes."

The gnome grunted.

"An' I'll keep a gun handy. If I get a god's chance to get the blackguard's backside!"

"You'd be for it, John."

"So'd he be—the dirty swine."

III

Bonthorn saw the American at the white gate in the holly hedge, and was moved to reflect upon the futility of labels, for to the newspaper mind Uncle Sam is Uncle Sam, strident and boastful, the dollar king, and Mr. Cripps was none of these things. He had a quiet voice and a quiet manner; a tall, thin, sallow man with gentle eyes. He did not speak English as England expected him to speak it. His opinions and his prejudices could be delicately shaded, and might appear as implications. If he foresaw those transfigurations which Mr. Shaw chuckles over in *The Apple Cart* he did not chuckle. It might be possible to divine that which the inward voice of him was saying about England. "You've got a lovely little country and you are trying to spoil it. And—after all—you can't feed yourselves, and a great part of your crowd is living on the savings of previous generations. They beat the big drum and shout about downing capital, and but for the capital invested abroad—many of them would not be alive. Free bread and free games, Mr. Bonthorn. The decline and fall of the New Rome. The future is with us."

He carried himself courteously and gently as in the presence of some very old servant who had many notable achievements to his credit, but whose white head was in the shadow of death. A venerable country, living on the illusion of some noise made

by a number of irresponsible and playful children, a country that could not say no to itself or to other countries, a corner that might become the world's garden. This green island set in the silver sea. Well, why not? Almost Mr. Cripps trod gently in the presence of the patriarch dreaming in his chair.

He did not hurry. He came up through the garden on leisurely long legs, pausing to look at things and to finger a label or a flower. To Bonthorn appearing in the white porch he gave a smile, a slight bow and a lift of the hat.

"Glad to meet you again, Mr. Bonthorn."

His dark eyes twinkled.

"No need to say pleased to be met. Dame Gloriana will be here at half-past four."

He spoke the name as though it was Elizabethan, a beautiful and spacious word, not to be clipped even in these days of speed.

"I did not hear a car."

Car—forsooth! As if England was not worth walking through in the green glory of the year! Mr. Cripps said so.

"Sure, sometime soon Hollywood will rediscover the world's legs. Honeysuckle in your hedges—too. I had to stop and smell and look. Tell me, what's the insect, Mr. Bonthorn?"

"For honeysuckle?"

"That long tube?"

"Yes. Some tongue is needed. Twenty-five mm. at least."

"The Privet Hawk-moth. A night-flyer. Rare."

"They set seed pretty seldom then."

"That's so."

Mr. Cripps took off his hat and laid it on one of the seats of the white porch. His face looked all smoothed out and happy. He produced a cigar-case and offered it to Bonthorn.

"No? I agree. Pity to spoil the smell of things. Could I have a glass of water?"

It was brought and handed to him, and he drank.

"Well—you have something to show me? When are you coming to California?"

"When—a garden——"

"Exactly. If I hadn't a partner—— But I'm greedy, Mr. Bonthorn; I want to see everything that is, and there's so much.

Spain calling you, and Kashmir. It's in my mind to go camping in Tibet. Do you know a man named Ingram?"

"I've met him."

"I want to meet that man. And Marion Cran."

"You have only to go on into Kent and you'll find both of them close together."

"I'll go. But you have things to show me. The great lady tells me your delphiniums——"

Bonthorn smiled strangely.

"I have been keeping my delphiniums just as they are—to show you. Come along."

Two tall men together they walked pleasantly and at ease to the Yew End nursery. They passed through the wired gate, and past two rows of young sweet peas. And Bonthorn paused with his hands in his pockets, and made a movement of the head.

"There you are. Some sight, isn't it?"

The American was silent. He looked with intelligent, soft eyes at all that ruin, and frowned slightly, and seemed puzzled. Flower lovers might play jests upon each other—but this! A mat of broken stems as though a tornado had passed, green pulp, confusion. He stared.

"I don't quite get you. This——?"

"We found it like that this morning."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Bonthorn——?"

"Someone got busy in the night."

The American looked shocked.

"God!"

He went a few steps forward and stood still.

"God! Who was the——?"

"I'm not sure—— I have a suspicion. Some gesture—that! I left them for you and Mrs. Gurney to see. The thing has a sort of significance. But come and look. The blackguard missed the prize pearl."

He took the Californian along the derelict border and showed him that solitary spire lashed to its green mast.

"He missed that. The best of all my crosses. One ought to chuckle, I suppose?"

Mr. Cripps gazed.

"God! That's gorgeous."

IV

Mrs. Gloriana was more shocked than either of them, and more angry, and as though for solace she went about carrying the Cairn in her arms, and Rollo being a gentleman, was full of loving licks. Did the lady smell sweet? Assuredly. During tea, given them under the cherry tree by Martha, with Mr. Jonathan G. Cripps feeding Thomas the cat on the most buttery pieces of Martha's bread and butter, Bonthorn made his request.

"May I christen the survivor Stella Lacey?"

She was pouring out tea for the two men. Her glances went hither and thither into the green glooms of the high woods. Somewhere a reaper droned, and the June grasses were falling. Yet even in this very peaceful spot a little tremor of disquietude troubled her. So might some Roman matron in a garden of Silchester or Old Sarum have felt on the east wind the rumour of the barbarians.

She smiled, and her glance was whimsical.

"Stella Lacey. Why not Mr. Lansbury? Or if you wish to be more historic and symbolical—Charles 1st?"

"I prefer Stella Lacey."

Mr. Cripps echoed him.

"Stella Lacey. It makes me dream. When I walk in that long gallery and look at that lock of hair in a glass case I understand that if the crowd has made up its mind to cut off your head—it will do it and call it a noble gesture."

Mrs. Gurney stroked the dog.

"I wonder, did the savage who smashed those flowers feel virtuous? No country lad would have done it. That's the town's touch."

She looked at Bonthorn as though her curiosity asked to be satisfied. She had more than a feeling that he knew the name of the destroying angel. He smiled at her, and his smile was wise.

"One connects that kind of wantonness with the new intelligentsia."

She nodded.

"Is there such a thing?"

"Always. The politically-minded young man. Bût in this case I think the inspiration was more primitive."

"Not jealousy?"

"Not exactly professional jealousy. Malice. Besides—it was a very small malice. If one has read the history of Ireland—for instance—during the revolutionary period, one ceases to be astonished at anything modern man does—and especially the so-called idealists. Imagine oneself butchering an Irish girl by the roadside because she was going out to play tennis with an Englishman!"

"Not idealism, Mr. Bonthorn——"

"O—yes—idealism gone mad, and utterly without a sense of humour. After all—I had my laugh. I think I would rather my idealist laughed—than raved."

The Californian produced a cigar.

"You're right there, Mr. Bonthorn. I'd say that a man like Mark Twain did more for humanity than a mad dog like Karl Marx. If anyone did that to my garden in California——"

Mrs. Gurney's eyes were mischievous.

"Would you laugh?"

"Sure, madam—I would try to—after I had handled my shotgun—and put it away again. Laughter carries farther than shotguns."

Chapter Eight

I

AFTERWARDS, Nicholas Bonthorn remembered that summer evening because of the poignancy and vividness of the contrasts that it carried. The smell of the green lane, and a primrose sky, and the cedars of Stella Lacey, and Mrs. Gurney's far-away smile.

The car should have come for her, but it did not arrive, and thinking that the chauffeur might be waiting at the end of the lane, she and Bonthorn and the Californian walked down to the bridge at Monks Lacey. Mr. Cripps, very conscious of this world of willows and flowering grasses and idle water, had the air of a man quoting poetry to himself. Immemorial elms, Elizabethan windows, sunsets, the sound of water falling at the weir!

But there were other sounds, voices and laughter, and looking over the hedge and across a strip of meadow and the stream the Californian saw youth at play, two young women in short skirts and bright jumpers, and three young men in pull-overs and plus-fours. On that piece of grass where the Mill House hung out its tablecloths someone had rigged up a couple of beansticks and a piece of string. The five were enjoying a jumping-match, the girls against the men.

Mr. Cripps paused.

"That's almost Greek. Strip them and they might be Spartans."

Mrs. Gurney looked amused.

"O—those young women——!"

The three of them stood to watch, unnoticed as yet by the young things on the other side of the stream. One of the lads was adjusting the string. He was something of a wag, but a nice wag, with his buttered head and laughing eyes.

"Now then—Jerry. Atta-boy!"

Jerry, a heavy young man whose fat calves curved backwards, mooched into position, charged, took off with the wrong foot, and

bungled it badly. The bean-rods shook. There was a chorus of derision.

"Mere man——!"

"I say—you're letting the sex down."

"Come on, Rachel. Show him the way."

The girl shook her hair and laughed.

"Rhoda's turn."

"No it isn't. No refusing. Come on."

She chose her distance, took a look at a readjusted string, ran, fluttered on quick feet, and slanting sideways like a man, went up and over. In the air she seemed poised like a bird. Landing, she shook her hair again and laughed.

Mr. Cripps was delighted.

"Now, wasn't that lovely? Just like a young animal. Good for the gods."

His enthusiasm had to applaud even in the face of possible indiscretion. He clapped his hands, and the unawareness of the moment was past. The young men stared. Rhoda looked sharply across as though annoyed. Rachel, turning suddenly, saw those three faces, but Bonthorn's face was the most vivid to her. Her sudden stillness was the self-conscious poise of the nymph surprised by the philosopher, and somehow resenting it. She gave a little flick of the head and showed Bonthorn her back.

The three went on to the bridge, but of the five who were left on the grass, four only were playful. Rachel sucked a grass stem and sat down on the bank, and looked like Cassandra.

"Come on, Rache. Have another shot."

"Don't be put out of your stride."

She shrugged temperamental shoulders.

"I beat Jerry; that's good enough."

"I say, who were the three interesting strangers?"

Rhoda was studying the back of her sister's neck.

"Innocence is bliss. Mrs. Gloriana Gurney of Stella Lacey."

"O, the duchess! I wonder what she thought of Rachel's effort? Shocking! And the Old Silver fellow with the black eye-shade. Some buccaneer?"

"Mr. Bonthorn."

"What, the flower johnnie? Bit of an oddity, isn't he?"

"O, possibly."

The Stella Lacey car had not arrived, and Mrs. Gloriana proposed to Mr. Cripps that they should walk up through the park. She explained that she had forgotten to tell Lambert, her chauffeur, to be at the bridge a quarter of an hour before she would need him. Lambert was one of those pleasant persons who are smilingly and inveterately unpunctual. Bonthorn was ready to walk with them.

"Supposing the car turns up?"

"Lambert will smoke a cigarette or go to sleep."

"Shall I ask someone at the Mill House to tell him?"

"You might. Yes, please do."

Bonthorn went in and found Mrs. Binnie putting cakes away in a tin. He had removed his hat. The prevailing crowd was either hatless or entered hatted.

"Good evening, Mrs. Buck. I wonder if you or one of your daughters would do something for us?"

Robinia, liking him very well, held a cake poised as though she was about to offer it to him.

"Certainly—Mr. Bonthorn."

"Mrs. Gurney's car hasn't turned up. It was to meet her at the bridge. We're walking. If the car comes would you tell the chauffeur to go back?"

"Of course, Mr. Bonthorn. To the house?"

"Yes."

They smiled at each other, and Bonthorn returned to the road.

Mr. Cripps's appreciation of beauty, genius and joy continued to flutter about the flower of the world's youth. How much affectation and silliness had passed away with the trailing skirt and the tight corset. Yes, youth was much more free, and more pleasant to watch, healthier, cleaner, better looking. That girl leaping was a symbolical figure, surely? A young Atalanta. And what had been the meaning of the apple?

Mrs. Gloriana was gently amused.

"That—too—was symbolical, Mr. Cripps. Man could not let woman outpace him. And yet—perhaps it was not man."

The Californian's quick mind caught her meaning.

"Old Nature. The apple of sex. Yes, that ties a woman to earth. Our idea of change—"

"Very relative, isn't it? I really can remember school treats

and parties many years ago when young women ran races. Certainly—they did not jump—because just then the social prejudice in the matter of dress——”

She caught Bonthorn's blue eye and was surprised to find it so serious. Was he thinking of those smashed larkspurs, or were there in him mysterious deeps of disapproval?

They came to the grass of the park. Mr. Cripps paused to estimate the height and girth of a Scotch pine.

“Now—what would be the age of that tree?”

Bonthorn's eye climbed the trunk.

“O, about eighty, I should think. Trees are much more calculable creatures. Sappy spring wood—and tough autumn.”

He heard Mrs. Gurney's gentle little laugh.

“Does that apply to humans? Yes, Spring is ravishing and restless, sappy and sad. It is so sudden with its beauty, so elusive, and with our passion for putting self into nature—we yearn to hold it back. Stay with us, stay in the young leaf and the apple blossom. Yes, the Spring used to hurt me—but not now.”

Both the men looked at her. It was the Californian who found the gracious phrase.

“You, madam, have a sort of immortality.”

She laughed.

“O, no, I have set my autumn wood, that's all. I'm tougher. I just react to the seasons without dreaming that anything is going to be very different. There may be a little more rain or frost, or even a little more sun. And our civilization is just like that. We may collect more plants and produce delightful hybrids, but the climate remains the same. We are just the same humans, just as cruel on occasions, just as splendid, just as silly and self important.”

Mr. Cripps reflected.

He replied: “It is only in an old country that such things can be thought and said.”

II

Bonthorn walked back alone, and coming within sight of the bridge at Monks Lacey he saw a girl leaning over the parapet and looking at the water. A yellow knitted coat, dark hair, dark legs,

the same figure that had floated over a piece of stretched string. And from the Mill House itself came sounds of music, syncopated stridencies, cheerful and active and crude, youth's music. And Bonthorn wondered, following the birdlike flight of Mrs. Gloriana's gentle cynicism. Had youth been much the same eighteen hundred years ago? Had British girls loitered at the ford to see Roman legionaries go past, and remark upon the fashion of a centurion's sandals? Probably. And perhaps there had been music, an improvisation upon trumpets and cymbals, and the soldiers had danced with the girls.

How like a centurion he was he did not suspect, or that there might be something of the eternal Roman in him, even in the nose and the carriage of the head. One of Cæsar's veterans. A nasal voice emanating from the Mill House gramophone asked the eternal question with the flavour of God's Own Country.

"Why do I love you? Why do you love me?"

But Bonthorn came to the bridge, ready with a hat and a greeting, and all in the course of the day's goodwill. "Good evening, Miss Buck." Yet, before he had uttered the salutation he realized that the girl was both seeing him and not seeing him. He had caught the sidelong trail of a glance, and received the impression of hunched shoulders and wilful unawareness.

He paused. He too could be wilful, and playfully so.

"Good evening."

She faced him for a moment with an assumption of surprise.

"O, good evening."

"By the way, do you know if Mrs. Gurney's car——?"

"O, yes—it went back half an hour ago."

Her attitude was both *farouche* and casual. He was not being encouraged to loiter, and he wondered. Youth was so temperamental.

He smiled.

"Congratulations on that jump."

She gave a flick of the head. Almost it said: "O, shut up. We're not in the same category." But a voice from the Mill House interrupted the interplay. The lad with the buttered head and the laughing eyes stood in the doorway.

"Hallo, Rachel. Come on—show a leg."

The invitation to the dance! She turned with an air of languor,

and without looking directly at Bonthorn, passed over the road towards the shadow of the chestnut tree.

"Evening, Mr. Bonthorn. I'm wanted."

He nodded. For a moment his blue eye was as whimsical as Mrs. Gurney's brown ones. He walked on over the bridge and turned into the lane. He had been rebuffed and he knew it, and he was sufficiently man to pursue the proposition. Had he been what the Americans call "A buttinsky"? Had her nay been a veiled yea? He was conscious of a little qualm of disgust. Sex was so incalculable. It might be piqued by some slimy, sensual cad, by a lust—that when balked—sneaked out with a stick and smashed flowers. He reacted against that little spasm of disgust. No, that wasn't quite credible. The solution was more sensitive, more subtle. He remembered her with that dying dog. She was not mere obvious flesh. She was shy of him just because of that very incident and its crudeness, as though he had surprised her naked, and the soul of her was a little resentful. He had—as it were—forced upon her an uneasy intimacy—and she drew back behind a young reserve, and was difficult—awkward.

Someone had once said to him: "O, yes, you're such a sanguine devil. If you see a silk stocking you don't suspect the hole in the heel. One of the world's optimists. Human nature is full of holes."

III

Rachel went in and danced. She danced very well in the manner of the modern tall young thing, back well hollowed, shoulders and head thrown back, her eyes looking squarely into the face of the man. Perhaps she appeared a little over-excited and vivacious, more than ready to laugh at anything and everything the lad said.

"You are a priceless person!"

He rather thought so too, and he did not mind her agreeing with him, but he was a nice lad, and he had a sense of fun.

"I say, we get on jolly well together. O, damn——"

The record had run itself out, and to him the romantic adventure was just beginning.

"Put on another, Jerry. You old ass—that's a tango. We don't tango, do we, Rachel?"

"Why not?"

"O—if you're daring me, come on. I'll be your Valentino."

Their tango ended in confusion and laughter, and in a sudden mutual warmth and clinging of hands.

"Sorry, all my fault. Let's revert. A foxtrot, Jerry."

Rhoda and her partner were walking briskly about between the tables, watching Rachel and young Hanson, and exchanging amused and meaning glances. Geoff was a little bit touched, but that was not exceptional. He was but one of the many and multifarious young men on wheels who came once to the Mill House, looked upon the daughters of Robinia, and came again. There was no nonsense about Rhoda and Rachel; they were not genteel or "refained"; they were just healthy young women with a frank outlook upon life, ready to give and to take when they pleased.

Geoffrey grew confidential.

"I'm getting my new M.B. next week. Hot stuff. She'll do eighty. What about coming for a spin?"

She glimmered her eyes at him.

"I might."

"Marvellous!"

"And I might not."

"O, don't be hard on a chap. Say yes."

"Right-o. But it can't be a Saturday or Sunday."

"Why?"

"Silly! I have to work."

"Does anyone work these days? Well, what about next Tuesday? I could get here at six."

"In the morning?"

"Is it likely! Well, that's a fixture."

He held her a little more firmly.

"Say—I wish it was a plane. We'd zoom over to Paris and back again. Lovely!"

"O, would we! Don't be such a speed-merchant."

But she liked young Hanson. Her young body warmed to him, and standing at her window that night she contrasted Geoffrey with Mr. Bonthorn. She could play with the younger man; they talked the same language, understood the same quips and their world's pattern. He was not desperately serious, and who wishes to be desperately serious? If sex was just a romp and a joke——?

But Bonthorn? She was afraid of Nicholas Bonthorn. He had made her feel uncomfortable and crude and apologetic. He was so much a finished piece of workmanship that her young self-in-the-making was both attracted and repelled. She might even feel that he was laughing at her, gently and subtly, but what young woman asks for such laughter?—more especially so when she is something of an Atalanta and pleasing to the young men.

Mr. Superior Bonthorn!

She would not allow to herself that she was afraid of him, but she could admit that he made her feel awkward and gauche. He was so vividly serious, so very much a person who walked head in the air through the little world of your marvellous fooling. She could not imagine him on a motor-bike, and herself on the pillion streaking round corners at fifty miles an hour.

"Nick, old thing, what about it?"

Yes, he was a sort of grandee who spoke a different language. He was quite old. He would seriously want to discuss serious things, as—he no doubt discussed them with Mrs. Gurney. That serene, stuck up old autocrat!

No, she wanted someone to play with, to fool with, to rush about the country on wheels, someone who could dance and talk nonsense. She would be so much more transcendent with a fellow whom she could call a silly fool. A one-eyed and learned philosopher stuck in a flower-garden! Something in her shrank from the mysterious menace of him.

Chapter Nine

I

HOOKE HILL was a noted stunting-ground for youth upon wheels. Local clubs held rallies and tests here, and any casual child with a passion for speed might challenge the declivity. That is to put it sententiously, but Hook Hill itself was not sententious. A mere lane, it snaked its way up a bluff between beech and pine woods, and on peaceful days its coils were as silent as the glidings of a snake. Peaceful people—a few—had houses about Hook Hill, nor were the remarks made by these same people upon the world on wheels flowered with sententiousness. Sir Oscar Marbury, taking his dogs for a ramble in the lane, and meeting a sports-model at speed, had had one dog killed, and had himself been driven up the bank.

“You young savages!”

On certain Saturdays and Sundays Hook Hill became Bedlam. Its beech woods had been beautiful with bluebells, but each year this beauty was being devastated. Someone had christened the place “Litter Lane.” Peaceful people protested, but apparently there was no redress.

As Marbury put it: “We don’t mind people coming to be in the country. That’s all to the good. But we do object to Birmingham and Brooklands becoming indigenous. We—who are a little sensitive and not wholly selfish, do ask progress to be a little more sensitive and a little less selfish.”

If other observers said that life was becoming half cinema show—half circus, the retort was obvious. Each generation to its ideal. There may be courage in the climb, and less stupidity than in baiting a bull. Hook Hill might reverberate, and its trees marvel, and its bluebells disappear, but the crowd must spread itself, and given leisure Hook Hill might even civilise the crowd.

Dr. Carver of Lignor, steering his car carefully out of the gates of Hurst Lodge, insinuated himself into the lane, and with brakes

applied, crawled round the first curve. The surface was bad, rain scoured and wheel worn. He knew the lane well; he had driven up it and down it at night and in all sorts of weather. Ahead of him he had an S-bend, with high, bracken-covered banks that oozed moisture and gave a greasy puddle to the clay. Scotch pines, larches and spruces towered on either side. He descended cautiously.

Entering the S-bend he heard something coming up with furious detonations. He hooted. He crowded his car over to the left until wings and bracken touched. Something flashed into view, a red motor-bicycle with a young man in a blue and white pull-over in the saddle, and a girl in yellow on the pillion. The rider was taking the curve at such a speed that he could not cut his corner. Carver braked desperately, ran his car half up the bank, and stuck there, but the crash was inevitable. The motor-bicycle caught the side of the car, and seemed to summersault. The girl was flung in the air. The rider and the machine crashed off and on in a tragic tangle, to come to rest confusedly in the crumpled bracken.

Carver got out of his car realizing that the luck had been with him, and that lad and machine might have come through his wind screen.

The girl was lying in the middle of the lane, and Carver went to her first. He recognized her. One of the Mill House young women! She was unconscious and lying on her back, with her pelvis twisted, and bending down he slipped a hand under her head. No blood, no wound. She was alive. Putting his hands under her arm-pits he drew her gently aside to the foot of the bank, for a machine climbing the hill at speed might have run over her.

He went to look at the man. There was blood here, even on the bracken, and the lad's head was horribly smashed. He was dead. Carver had seen many dead men in the war, and had learnt to recognize intuitively those attitudes of distorted stillness. Poor, reckless young idiot, showing off to a girl! The thing shocked him, though he had a fairly tough shell.

Well, the mess had to be cleared up. He lit a cigarette, and had decided to walk back to Hurst Lodge and telephone, when he heard a car climbing the hill. It appeared and at a sedate

pace, a little Austin Seven with two middle-aged women in it. He held up a hand.

"There's been an accident. I wonder if you would go and telephone. I'm a doctor."

"Of course——"

"A motor cyclist——"

"My dear, the boy and girl on a red machine. They passed us, you remember?"

"I do remember."

The woman at the wheel of the Austin was a capable and decisive person.

"Get out, Mildred. You may be of use. Isn't there an A.A. box on the main road?"

Carver had thrown his cigarette into the green bracken.

"Yes, turn left when you reach the main road at the top. If the scout is there get him to phone to Lignor Hospital for the ambulance. Also, he had better warn the police. The lad's dead."

The younger and smaller of the two women got out of the car.

"Really—it's too horrible! I'm afraid I'm——"

"O, just go and sit by the girl. I'm going a little way down the road to warn people."

The Austin Seven drove off, its occupant calling back to Carver: "I'll bring the A.A. man back with me. He may be of use."

The little woman in brown went and sat on the bank within a yard of the unconscious Rachel. She felt helpless and she looked it. Meanwhile, Dr. Carver placed himself half-way down the S-bend, and as it so often happens on such occasions, every casual car in the neighbourhood appeared attracted to Hook Hill. A young man in a bowler hat driving two girls in a Chrysler disregarded Carver's signal, but seeing there had been a smash, pulled up just beyond the unconscious Rachel. He and his women got out and stared.

Carver followed them up.

"Did you hear what I said?"

He of the bowler looked at him blankly.

"Thought we might be of some use."

"I'm a doctor and there is nothing for you to do. Move your

car on please, and don't block the lane. We're expecting the ambulance."

The young man was rude.

"All right, all right. You aren't on traffic control, and I'm not a fool."

"Kindly move your car," said the doctor, "and prove it."

The car was moved, but only to the top of the hill, and its occupants came back to stare. Car after car appeared, and picking up Carver's exhortation, joined the Chrysler up above. The crowd increased. It clumped itself round the dead man, and stood and gazed upon Rachel. It made remarks; it criticized; it offered suggestions.

The lane became jammed like the neck of a bottle, and Carver, who was a quick-tempered man, became eloquent.

"Look here, all you people, doesn't it occur to you that it would be much kinder to clear out? You're blocking the road—and I'm expecting the ambulance. I'm the doctor in charge."

Some went; others stayed. And then the A.A. scout arrived with a perspiring police constable on a bicycle. Carver knew the constable and appealed to him.

"Will you get these fools out of the way?"

The constable was of the same opinion as the doctor. He became the busy autocrat. The lane began to clear, while the A.A. scout went down to the foot of the hill to hold up traffic until the ambulance had come and gone.

The little brown woman came and twittered to Carver.

"O, doctor, please, she's recovered consciousness. She's——"

Carver, who had been supporting the activities of the constable, hurried to Rachel. He knelt down beside her.

"You know me, Miss Buck."

Her brown eyes regarded him with a strange expression, a mingling of bewilderment and terror.

"I—I can't move. Who's holding my legs?"

She tried to raise herself as though to look, and Carver laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

"Just lie still. Leave it to us. The ambulance is coming for you."

"But—my legs——"

"That's all right. We'll see to all that."

"Where's Geoff? What happened to Geoff?"

"Now don't you worry. We're looking after Geoff."

She closed her eyes and gave a little shudder.

"Dr. Carver—I believe—something's happened to my back."

He patted her shoulder and stood up. He was aware of the little woman in brown sitting on the bank. They exchanged glances. The little woman seemed to wince and to turn her head away. The police constable, hot, combative and blue eyed, came down the hill.

"Lot of sheep. You'd think a crowd like that would think."

Carver showed the hard edge of a smile.

"Crowds don't think, Killick. You—ought to know that."

The man's blue eyes were looking at the girl. They grew gentle.

"Poor kids."

Carver strolled over to his car, and the little woman in brown followed him.

"Doctor, I'm not just horribly inquisitive—but do you think her back is broken?"

Carver took out his cigarette-case.

"I'm rather afraid it is."

II

On those long summer evenings the sun set between the spurs of the two hills above the high woods of Monks Lacey. It seemed to trail a cloak of gold up the narrow valley. The back of the Mill House was all light, its front in the shadow. The chestnut tree threw its shade as far as the mill-pool, and from this great patch of shadow the river glimmered out like light escaping from under a cloud.

When Dr. Carver pulled up his car outside the white posts and chains of the Mill House he realized that the road did not suffer its servants to be idle. This was the hour of those who did not dine, and who took an egg with their tea. The fine evening had brought Mrs. Binnie business, and more than a dozen people were seated at the tables outside the house. The gramophone was active, uttering that song from "The Show-Boat."

"Why do I love you? Why do you love me?"

Dr. Carver climbed out. The tables were just so many tables with human shapes attached to them. He passed between them, and saw Rhoda in the doorway with a tea-tray. A young man wearing a blue beret with a yellow tassel attached to it, remarked to a girl upon the obvious condition of the doctor's car.

"That fellow's taken a biff."

Rhoda stood still. She looked at Carver, and something passed from his eyes to hers. Her straight black brows seemed to draw together.

"Is your mother in?"

"Yes."

She stood aside with the tray, and Carver, pausing by her, looked at the dish of bread and butter.

"Your sister has been hurt. Is your mother alone?"

"Two couples having tea. Serious?"

"I'm afraid so."

"She's not——?"

"No. Thrown off. I'll get your mother to see me alone."

But Rhoda put the tray down on a vacant table, and with an air of striding decision, went in first. She looked for her mother, but Mrs. Binnie was not there. She was in the kitchen.

Rhoda and the doctor exchanged glances.

"Through that door."

Dr. Carver crossed towards the door, and Rhoda went and silenced the gramophone before going out to recover the tray. It was destined for the young man with the tassel and his lady. Rhoda was aware of him regarding her with interested and prominent eyes. He had a little, wet, ginger-coloured moustache, and she did not like that kind of moustache.

"Been a smash, has there?"

With an air of dark detachment she put down the tray. She ignored his curiosity.

"Care for lettuce—green food?"

He might have been a rabbit.

Through the open doorway of the kitchen the doctor saw a little woman putting a slab of cherry cake back into a tin. He was impressed by the smallness of Mrs. Binnie, her air of inadequacy in the presence of death and disaster. She looked so ineffectual. Her little narrow shoulders fell away, as did her chin

and forehead. She was all negative curves. Her tremulous hands were trying to fix the lid to the tin, and the lid was refusing to sit down comfortably, for it and the tin had received rough treatment in the hurry and scurry of life. Mrs. Binnie's lips moved. She talked to herself and that tin.

"Now—do be obliging. O, bother you! No, it isn't at all funny. You'll make me use my temper, you will—really."

Abruptly she became conscious of being observed. Her small, birdlike eyes discovered Carver.

She stood quite still, holding the tin against her body. There was a momentary flicker of her pale lashes. And Carver felt strangely sorry for her, this little, dusty, busy creature who seemed to scurry in and out amid life's casual feet.

He walked through the doorway into the kitchen and closed the door. He had to break the news to her, and as a doctor he knew that when the knife has to be used on sensitive flesh, swiftness and suddenness may be merciful.

"Mrs. Buck—I have just sent your daughter to the hospital. She was thrown off the pillion seat——"

The tin slipped a little way down Mrs. Binnie's body, but was clutched and held. For a moment her face was like a little mask in wax.

"My Rachel——?"

Carver nodded.

"Sit down, won't you."

He went for a kitchen chair, but she remained standing, clutching the tin, and into her still face sudden lines and creases seemed to sear themselves.

"No—I won't sit down. You're telling me the truth, Dr. Carver? She's not——?"

He watched her face. He half expected that little figure to crumple up.

"No. But she's rather seriously injured."

"How?"

"I'm afraid it's her back."

Mrs. Binnie uttered one little cry like a small animal in pain.

"O, don't say—it's broken, doctor."

Carver moved the chair nearer to her.

"You are taking it—very bravely, Mrs. Buck. I'm hoping——"

And suddenly she moved. She walked to a table and put the tin on it, and seemed to falter. Her hands went to her face. Without a sound she seemed to collapse into herself, like a dress allowed to fall upon the floor. Her head struck a leg of the table.

The Mill House kitchen was used by the Buck family as a living-room, and under one of the lattice windows stood a sofa, Victorian and severe, and still wearing its black horsehair cover. Carver picked up Mrs. Binnie and carried her to the sofa. She had the weight and shape of a child, though she had borne two strapping daughters. He was laying her on the sofa when Rhoda came in.

Her darkness was suddenly fierce.

"You've told her—too much."

Carver forgave her this fierceness.

"I'm sorry. It's kinder—sometimes. Get a cushion."

Rhoda grabbed one out of her mother's basket-chair.

"What's happened exactly?"

"I'm very much afraid your sister has broken her back."

"Good Lord!"

Rhoda stood stark and still for a moment.

"That damned new machine of young Geoff's. I'll tell that lad something——"

She caught herself up.

"Sorry. The deep end's no good. What happened to——?"

"Dead."

She did not ask how it happened and he did not tell her. The small, still figure on the sofa concerned them both.

"No, keep the cushion there. I want her head low."

Rhoda was a practical young woman. She unfastened her mother's dress and loosened her stays, though the little body seemed to need no such corseting. But other things were loosened in Rhoda: compassion, a sense of clanship that was primal, a very deep affection for this courageous little oddity whom she called mother. Her own life and its affairs seemed to keep step with her compassion. She was thinking: "Fred and I were to get married next year. Well, it can't be—by the feel of things. And that's that."

She was abrupt with Carver, but no more abrupt than she was with herself.

"What about cold water?"

"Yes, on a handkerchief. Flick her face gently."

It was done.

"Any more to tell me, doctor, before she comes to?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Is my sister going to——?"

"I can't say yet."

"And if she doesn't die, she'll be paralysed?"

"I can't tell you anything definitely yet. If there has been a fracture——"

But Rhoda held up a hand, and her lips were firm.

"She's coming to. No more—details—yet."

Carver smiled faintly.

"I have a feeling that your mother has——"

"Pluck? O, plenty."

She was down on her knees by the sofa, her long, shapely legs sticking out. She put a cool hand on Mrs. Binnie's forehead.

"Hallo, mumsie—I'm here. It's ali right, dear, it's all right."

Mrs. Robinia looked at her with vague eyes, whimpered, and tried to sit up.

"Did I faint? How very silly of me. I——"

Rhoda restrained her.

"No, lie still for a bit, mumsie."

Her mother lay still—but her small face seemed to sharpen and to grow firm.

"Very well, my dear, just for two minutes. Is Dr. Carver there? O doctor, is my girl awake?"

"She's quite conscious, Mrs. Buck."

"She's at Lignor?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Binnie crossed her hands on her bosom.

"Rhoda, my dear, go and get the car out. No, never mind the people. They can finish their teas and leave the money. We'll lock up. I am going to see Rachel."

Rhoda stood as though to refuse her mother this effort, but she met Carver's eyes, and the doctor nodded.

"Let her go," said his glance, "it's her urge. It can't do your sister any harm—I think. Your mother has grit."

Rhoda bent down and kissed Mrs. Binnie's forehead.

"I will go and get everything ready, mother."

And Carver, being a man of some understanding, did not offer to drive them to Lignor in his damaged car.

Chapter Ten

I

MRS. ROBINIA had contributed a characteristic remark upon the Great War, to the effect that without socks and trouser-buttons the heroic war would have fizzled out. Yes, life was a matter of socks and trouser-buttons, and the bread bill and laddered stockings, and just as Mrs. Binnie was in the act of buttoning up her best shoes one of the buttons flew.

The callous cussedness of inanimate things seemed to cut her to the quick. She uttered reproaches.

"Now—you—would do that, wouldn't you? Really! As if you couldn't have waited."

And she burst into tears. She wept quietly and continuously while Rhoda was reattaching the button, but when the shoe was on Mrs. Binnie's tears ceased. She stood up. She went to the sink and dabbed her face with the corner of a towel dipped in cold water. Life and the conventions required to behave like a mother and a woman of the world, and her small, frail figure ceased to quake.

"Now, my dear."

Rhoda had dealt with the last of their clients. They locked up the Mill House and entered that gaudy little car. Its radiator cap had been decorated with the slim and silver figure of a girl poised as in the act of leaping, and Mrs. Robinia's eyes seemed to fix themselves upon that figure. Possibly she saw it as a symbol, youth delighting in speed, but youth on the edge of unexpected tragedy.

She made a remark that sounded irrelevant.

"I shall have to get up a little earlier in the morning."

But Rhoda understood it, and its secret, household heroism. Her dark and determined young face confronted the road and other realities.

"No you won't. I can do that."

Mrs. Binnie moistened her lips.

"England's not done yet."

Another seeming irrelevancy, but it was a tribute to her daughter.

Lignor had shut up its shops for the night. The streets were empty save for a few strolling couples, and dogs who were being taken for walks. The Buck car crossed the market-place dominated by the spire of the Gothic church that rose whitely into the evening sunlight from a cloud of elms and chestnut trees. Opposite the Jacobean market-house with its statue of Charles II they passed Mr. Stanley Shelp oiling his way on fat thighs to some aggressive adventure. He both saw them and did not see them. He had banished the Bucks from the scheme of the new dispensation, but the Paul Pry in him reflected.

"I bet the old woman diddles us. Might twist her for accounts. It's an idea."

The hospital stood in South Street, a late Georgian building that had been added to and remodelled. Its forecourt was entered by iron gates, upon one of which was posted the admirable exhortation: "Motors—please park on the left. No hooting." For the obvious thing was to drive your car right up to the hospital entrance, and hoot for the porter and leave your engine running, and on departing you might open the throttle wide and roar *au revoir*. Dr. Carver had been able to persuade the hospital committee that the hospital was for the patients, and should be a place of peace. One of the most flagrant noise-mongers had been a cheerful and athletic young curate who drove like Jehu in a ramshackle but muscular car.

Rhoda saw the notice and followed its suggestions. She parked the machine under the shade of a row of old lime trees, and slipping out without troubling to open a door, stood to help her mother, but Mrs. Robinia was in no need of assistance. Her small face was set and sure.

"I think I'll go in alone, my dear. Afterwards——"

Rhoda nodded.

"Right-o. I'll wait here."

The small figure disappeared into the vestibule where a porter in dark-blue uniform met it. This man was also the driver of the hospital ambulance, and he knew Robinia by sight.

"I've come to see my daughter."

The porter, being a sympathetic and rather florid person with blue eyes and a broad and benignant nose, took Mrs. Binnie by the arm.

"This way, m'am, up the stairs."

But Mrs. Buck was holding tightly to her dignity. She did not want to be stirred up by the spoon of emotionalism. Her two small hands were clenched fists. She swallowed twice, and gently detaching herself, walked towards the stairs.

"It's kind of you, but I can manage."

The porter looked a little abashed.

"You'll find the Sister. Turn left, first floor."

Half-way up the stone stairs Mrs. Binnie met Dr. Carver coming down, putting a pair of pince-nez away in a case. He looked at Mrs. Binnie's small, stark face, and gave her the words that she needed.

"Ah—Mrs. Buck—that's right. Your daughter has been asking for you. We've got her comfortably to bed."

Mrs. Binnie swallowed hard.

"Yes, bed's the best place. I shan't upset her, doctor."

"Of course you won't."

He turned and went up with her to the door of the ward, and spoke to the little nurse who met them.

"Nurse, Mrs. Buck has come to see her daughter for five minutes. Show her the way, please."

He did not wink at the nurse, but the staff at Lignor Hospital had learnt to lip read Dr. Carver's facial instructions. He might have said "Don't fuss her. Let her alone—with the girl." He stood for a moment to see what passed, and watched Mrs. Binnie being conducted to a bed round which a green screen had been placed. She disappeared behind it, and the nurse came back.

Carver spoke to her in an undertone.

"Ten minutes. Don't worry. She'll be all right."

When Mrs. Binnie passed behind the screen and looked at her younger daughter she had a sudden feeling that she was looking at the Rachel of eighteen years ago, the child of five or so who had been subject to strange terrors. Rachel had been a very pretty child, a purple pansy without the scowl, and her beauty on this summer evening had a strangeness. It had a quality that caused her mother a spasm of pain. She held her breath for a moment and

saw Rachel as she had seen her years ago, emerging from one of those night terrors. "Mother—mother——"

There was a chair and she sat down on it. She bent and kissed Rachel, but her kiss had a brave restraint.

"Well, my darling, you—have—given us a fright."

One of Rachel's hands sought Mrs. Binnie's. She was mute. Her eyes were full of the stillness of fear. She looked at her mother as though that familiar little face could reassure her, and the voice conjure away the horrors of some dream.

"I'm so sorry, mumsie."

Mrs. Binnie managed to smile.

"Now, you mustn't talk too much. Rhoda's downstairs. We came up in the car. Dr. Carver has been so kind."

Rachel's lips moved. She seemed to question her mother's cheerfulness. Was it assumed? Did Mrs. Binnie understand, or realize what had happened? This horror of helplessness!

"Did Dr. Carver tell you?"

"O, yes, of course, my dear. Naturally. But—when—one thinks of your being thrown off like that——"

"They think my back is injured, mumsie. I can't move my legs."

Mrs. Binnie swallowed.

"O—I expect it's the shock, darling. Besides, in these days doctors can do anything."

"They are going to X-ray me to-morrow."

Her eyes watched her mother's face.

"Mumsie—I have a feeling—that it's—bad. Don't be frightened, dear, but I can't help thinking—I mean—if I'm helpless—a sort of dead weight on you——"

Mrs. Binnie tried not to wince. She held firmly to Rachel's hand.

"You mustn't think such things yet, dear. Of course—you are going to get better. A dead weight—indeed! Didn't I nurse you once for six weeks——?"

Rachel closed her eyes.

"Mumsie—you wouldn't grow to hate me—would you?"

Mrs. Binnie was profoundly shocked. She bent down and her kiss had a twinge of passion.

"My dear—my little Rachel girl! O, it won't be like that, and if it were—I think I'd love you all the more."

The girl's hand touched her mother's face.
"Perhaps—mumsie—it's only a bad dream."

II

Bonthorn, coming down to the bridge from Stella Lacey with a book he had borrowed from the Gurney library, saw the Mill House dark against the afterglow. He had taken the river path, and it brought him through a grove of beeches to the park fence where the ground fell away in a flurry of fern. Between this slope and the road lay a tongue of marshy land set with willow and alder, and stippled in the spring with kingcups, and bristling with rush and sedge. The path crossed it as a grassy dyke and opened upon the main road by a swing-gate some fifty yards south of the mill.

The Mill House was shut up and without lights, but as he drew level with it Bonthorn saw tables standing behind the posts and chairs, and the tables were covered with cloths, nor had the tea-things been cleared away. He was passing on when he became aware of a figure balanced on one of the chains where the chestnut tree threw its deepest shade. And Bonthorn recognized young Tanrock.

He nodded and spoke.

"Everybody out, apparently."

It was the sort of obvious and casual remark that one made brightly to a pleasant lad perched on a gate, but young Tanrock rose from the chain, and left it swinging.

"I'm just waiting, sir, to hear the news."

Bonthorn drew up.

"I missed them. They must be up at Lignor. I rushed down here when a chap came into our garage. But perhaps you haven't heard?"

"No. What's happened?"

"Poor Rachel's been badly smashed."

Bonthorn's face seemed to sharpen.

"I'm sorry to hear that. How—?"

"She went out with young Hanson from Oakhurst on his M.B. Apparently they hit a car on Hook Hill and crashed. He was stunting—I guess."

"Good God!"

"Young Hanson was killed. Curious thing—they hit the doctor's car, Carver of Lignor. He 'phoned up the ambulance and took Rachel into hospital. Poor kid."

"Fatal?"

"I don't know. Rumour has it—her back's broken. Pretty bloody, isn't it?"

Bonthorn stood still. He looked at those uncleared tables that somehow gave the impression of panic and sudden flight. He was aware of young Tanrock's sorrowful slouch. And suddenly he remembered the dog and its broken back, and Rachel kneeling with her saucer of water and eyes of compassion. He was profoundly shocked.

"Her back! But perhaps— Are you sure?"

Tanrock moved restlessly, hands in pockets.

"Well, no. I'm just waiting to hear. They'll be back some time. But if it's her back——"

"Yes."

"Well—I'd rather be dead. Yes, if it happened to me. Just think——!"

Bonthorn shifted the book from one hand to the other.

"To youth—yes. One can only hope——"

Young Tanrock's eyes were looking at him.

"Queer, isn't it. I can't get that dog out of my mind, Mr. Bonthorn, the dog you——"

And Bonthorn nodded.

"Yes. I buried him up in my orchard. You're going to wait?"

"Rather."

"I'd like to hear. Perhaps you could——"

The younger man understood.

"Up the lane, isn't it?"

"Yes, a white gate in a holly hedge. If you could just stroll up and leave word."

"I will."

Bonthorn went on over the bridge and into the lane where the soft green gloom of the dusk hung between the hedges. A streak of light touched the pool, linking up the moment with that incident of a few days ago, those young things at play, and Rachel skimming over a stretched string. How ironical! That such a

thing should happen to youth in the spring of its year! And as he walked on he thought of his smashed delphiniums, and some malicious savage with a stick. A flower with a broken stem! The dusk came gently, and the high woods seemed to draw together until the valley became a grey-green cleft with the stream threading it. He saw the gate where she had stood on that moonlight night, and the pale lane going on to Beech Farm.

He heard Rollo at the other gate, scratching and impatient, joyous whimperings.

"Hallo, old fellow, mind the paint!"

He picked up the Cairn and carried him as he had carried that other dog, but Rollo was very much alive, and his desire was to lick Bonthorn's face. Also, he disapproved of the book which shared the embrace, and scratched at it with two fore-paws. Bonthorn saw a light shine out suddenly. Mrs. Martha was lighting the sitting-room lamp. He saw her come to the window and pull down the blind.

He went in, and putting the dog down on the sofa, and the book on the table, found himself in the presence of the very soul of Puritanism. Martha was adjusting the lamp-wick, for lamps were still used at Yew End, and Martha somehow approved of lamps, smelly things though they were when not properly attended to. But lamps were Biblical and catholic. The parable of the Wise and the Unwise Virgins would have lost for Martha all its vivid austerity had those maidens been pictured as carrying electric torches.

Her obduracy and her conscientiousness showed in the way she kept the lamps.

"Have you heard the news, Martha?"

Martha had heard no news. And what was news but organized halfpenny gossip put up for sale?

"One of Mrs. Buck's daughters badly injured."

Martha gave a last severe glance at the lamp.

"One of those young women! I'm not surprised. Tearing about the country with their skirts blowing above their knees."

Bonthorn smiled gently.

"Rather a tragedy—though, Martha, to have your back broken just when——"

Martha looked at him.

"One of them motor-bikes, I suppose? Such things shouldn't be allowed. It's asking for trouble——"

"We get it sometimes, Martha, whether we ask for it or not."

"That's God's choice, sir. I'm sorry for Mrs. Buck. She's not a bad little woman, and I reckon she's enough to bear."

No, Martha would not say that she was sorry for the girl, for poor Rachel was one of her Unwise Virgins, and turning in the doorway she discovered Rollo on the sofa.

"You'll spoil that dog, sir."

"One must spoil something, Martha."

"I don't hold with spoiling things, sir."

"Not even puddings, Martha. As a matter of fact I have never known you spoil a pudding."

That was the worst or the best of Mr. Bonthorn. If he teased you or gave you a flip of the finger, he did it with such a smile, or with a little piece of flattery that would not allow a woman's teeth to be on edge. Martha might issue decretals, but not to him. He was the one incorrigible man to whom her middle-aged severity allowed a tolerant shrug. He was somehow unique, but differently so from that Puck—old Osgood, whom Mrs. Martha treated with the imperiousness of an elderly Titania. "Mischievous old rascal!" John did not loiter at her back door.

She closed the door on Mr. Bonthorn and his dog and his book as though she were shutting him in for the night, but Bonthorn's mood was neither for book nor lamp. He allowed Mrs. Martha to get away to her kitchen, and then he threw up the lower sash of the window, and slipped out on his long legs. The dog sprang after him, but sensing the silence and the inwardness of his master's mood, was no more than a little shadow at his heels. With cocked head he attended to the filling and the lighting of a pipe, and following Bonthorn to the white gate in the holly hedge, lay down with a deep and satisfied sigh.

Bonthorn leaned upon the gate. The road down yonder was strangely silent, but he heard a car come from the direction of Lignor and stop at Mill House. Apparently it was put away in a shed, and protestingly so, its exhaust emitting one emphatic and final bang. Yes, that would be the Mill House car, that little silver and vermillion bath on wheels. He waited. He felt the silence of the summer night as a challenge to all that rather raucous prag-

matism, the Cheerio of progress. A wonderful age! O, assuredly so, but so the Romans might have felt in the time of Trajan, Julius, Aurelius, Severus, corn-ships, games, a gradual and opulent decadence. Then—fewer Romans, more tax-gatherers, a purblind proletariat, and less and less opulence. Lastly, the barbarians.

But where were the barbarians of to-day? For a contrast—the increasingly unfit, the morons, the little people who were flattered? What would Martha's views be on eugenics? And what were views but cerebral acrobatics?

He waited, and presently he heard footsteps coming up the lane, a young man's steps. Young Tanrock. No, young Tanrock was not exactly decadent. Possibly he and his breed might be left to deal with the Shelps.

It had become very dark, and Bonthorn spoke.

"The gate's here. Good of you to come."

The little red point of a cigarette glowed.

"That's all right, Mr. Bonthorn. I'm afraid it's rather bad."

"Is it?"

"I had a few words with Rhoda. She'd seen the doctor alone. He told her more than he told Mrs. B."

"No hope?"

"No, it's not so much that. Carver thinks her back is broken, but quite low down. He thinks she'll live—but it may be a sort of living death, you know."

Bonthorn was looking at the dark mass of the beech tree.

"At her age! What a tragedy!"

"You're right."

Chapter Eleven

I

IF Mrs. Robinia hoisted her flag with "Business as Usual" embroidered upon it, that was the result of her dire necessity, since there was nothing else for her to do, for when the doctors had made their diagnosis, and Mrs. Binnie had paid the fee of the expert who had travelled down from London to Lignor and had echoed all that Dr. Carver and his confrères had said, the Mill House knew how it stood.

"O—my dear, if I wasn't her mother——!"

Mothers do not wish their daughters dead, yet when Mrs. Binnie had realized what Rachel's life might be for Rachel, she had felt very near to despair. Dr. Carver had set out to explain to her the unusual and rather baffling elements in the case. There appeared to be no fracture of the spinal column, but a rupture of the cord itself complicated by the pressure of extravasated blood. Dr. Carver put it to Mrs. Binnie as simply as he could. The injury was in the lower part of the cord; it seemed probable that Rachel would live, but she might never regain the use of her lower limbs. She would be bed-ridden, a nursing case that would have to be cared for day in—day out. In some respects she would be more helpless than a baby who has to be washed and dressed and kept meticulously clean. She would need a special mattress, massage, ministrations—intimate and thorough and never ending. She might live for years.

Dr. Carver spoke gently, but to Mrs. Binnie he seemed to be closing door after door, or attaching a series of weights to her already overburdened heart. An air-mattress and pillows, and waterproof sheets, O, certainly. And a room on the ground floor? Yes, there was the little room beyond the tea-room, which had never been furnished. And massage? She supposed that she could soon teach herself to rub and knead. And washings with rectified

spirit, and the clothes to be kept free from creases. She sat very still, and listened, with her little head drooping.

Carver realized that he was laying straw after straw upon the back of this small camel.

"Of course, one might try to get her into some institution."

But Mrs. Buck would have none of it.

"O—I'll manage somehow. But can't you give me any hope, doctor?"

Carver was tempted to prophesy possible ameliorations.

"As a matter of fact we did hope that we could set down all the symptoms—to bleeding and the pressure of the blood in the spinal canal."

"Isn't that possible, doctor?"

Carver hesitated.

"Well, you see—one has to be honest, and to be guided by what one finds. The paralysis came on almost immediately. One might say at once. That rather negatives the idea of mere pressure by bleeding. I'm sorry."

From somewhere Mrs. Binnie conjured up a whimsical little smile.

"I'm sure you are. So, you can't promise me——?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. There's just this, no need for you to worry about fees."

"O, doctor—I couldn't think of——"

Carver collected his hat and gloves.

"You have plenty to worry about. We'll cut out what we can. No, that's quite all right. I'm not a cannibal."

She sat alone with her problem. Money, O—yes, money! She could manage to go on making money, perhaps enough money to keep the Mill House from tumbling into the river, but it wasn't merely a question of money. Time, tissue, travail. Hands and feet, washings up and washings down, table-cloths, crockery, food. That road pouring its people upon her, people who were impatient, a world on wheels in a hurry to be served. Did she feel like a little animal in a cage, turning a wire wheel, unable to stop? Her courage and her compassion might endure—but Rhoda?

How long would Rhoda stand it? Could she be expected to stand it? Was it reasonable to expect any young woman to stand

it? Rhoda had a life of her own, and a rapid temper, and urges that asked to be satisfied. There was young Fred Tanrock. Inevitably the day would come—sooner or later—when Rhoda would go. Who could blame her?

And then? A hired girl, some perfunctory young woman, or a series of perfunctory young women who became bored with frightful regularity, and who disappeared! Plates and plates of bread and butter, eternal washings up, oceans of tea, scurrying to and fro, impatient humanity asking for boiled eggs.

Eggs! Just when all the hot water was needed! Eggs! No, it would be a question of legs, of keeping the pot boiling, and the tables supplied, while a paralysed girl lay in that little room.

And how would Rachel take it?

Metaphorically Mrs. Binnie threw her apron over her head. She felt crushed, bewildered, overwhelmed. She went out alone, and wept.

She chose a most strange place for her weepings, an old sugar-box in the shed where the small car lived. But the car was not there at the moment. Rhoda had taken it up to Lignor, to see Rachel and to buy stores. And Mrs. Binnie shut the door, and sat on the empty sugar-box and wept. Her chin and the front of her little frock were all wet.

"Well—really! As if—I hadn't——! O, Tom, why did you leave me with two girls?"

But if her eyes and her chin were wet, she did not squeal like the raucous fanatics who would cut the throats of the more efficient and adventurous few and pour the blood as a libation at the feet of their Clay Idol. She was more obscurely heroic than the demagogues. She sat there in her wet woe, resolving to make the best of things, to set her alarm clock for half-past five, to will the miraculous, and to carry on.

II

But for the fact that Rhoda was wearing shoes with crêpe soles Mrs. Binnie would not have been caught in that situation. The door of the shed opened suddenly, and Rhoda beheld her mother sitting on that sugar-box rather like a hen on a nest. And Mrs. Robinia was just as little peeved.

"My dear—bouncing in on one! You might have knocked."

Which, of course, was ridiculous, for one does not knock at the door of an empty garage, or expect to surprise Niobe upon a sugar-box. But Rhoda did not say so. She looked at her mother, and then closed the door.

Mrs. Binnie had to accept the self-betrayal and its consequences. The shed possessed one small window covered with dust and cobwebs, but the light was adequate.

"I've forgotten my handkerchief, my dear."

Rhoda produced one. Actually she dried her mother's eyes like a capable and strong-minded young nurse. Her own voice was not quite as full and steady as usual.

"Mustn't sneak away like this—all by yourself—"

"My dear—I simply had to. It came over me all at once. But I'm quite all right now. I didn't hear the car. You'll be wanting to bring it in."

Rhoda produced something else that was white, and more crepitant than a handkerchief. She dropped the little wad of notes in her mother's lap.

"Fred got rid of it for me. Twenty pounds. Not so bad. That will help things—just now."

Mrs. Binnie looked at the notes, fingered them, and emitted two or three soft sobs.

"O, my dear—you've sold it?"

"Of course. Rachel had a half share. We want some ready money."

Mrs. Binnie put out a hand.

"Well—really—my dear, it's lovely of you. I was so worried. I had to think, and when one starts thinking——"

Rhoda grasped her hand and raised her mother from the box.

"Come on, old lady—this is a family affair. I'm not exactly a quitter."

Mrs. Buck, on her feet, and dabbing her chin, looked intently at Rhoda.

"What about Fred? You see—I——"

"Fred will have to wait. I'm not going to leave you until I see how things go. Besides—it may be better than we think, mumsie."

"My dear—you don't know—I was just saying to myself—Rhoda has her life to live."

"Well, it will be here, for the next twelve months, anyway. What else? I'm not a mush-merchant. I'm not going on the dole because the job's too tough. Come on. To-day's Saturday. We shall have the crowd on us this afternoon."

She led her mother out by the hand.

"I left word with Gladys to come along and help. She's not a bad flapper."

Mrs. Binnie, with a damp handkerchief compressed into a little ball, emerged into the sunlight.

"That's the last and only blub I'll have, my dear. We'll manage somehow. Yes, we'll manage somehow."

III

It rained, and Mrs. Gurney could never promise her own soul how a rainy day would affect it, and whether she would feel soothed or restless. For there were days when she would tire of her books, and all the illusion of reality, and the pretending that things mattered. Moods! If she allowed herself to wander like yesterday through the garden and the house, pausing to stand and stare and perhaps to exclaim: "My love, how beautiful you are," a flower could not answer her. And yet, to a man like Bonthorn flowers spoke, using no sentimental lingo, or—rather—they were one of the scripts used by his Unknown Artist.

He was so full of scorn for the mechanically minded, for those pedants who proposed to regard life as a vast jigsaw puzzle the pieces of which were bundled together in a bag and somehow sorted themselves out and made a picture. Why deny any scheme when the delicacy and splendour of the scheming were so obvious?

He would say—"Imagine it. A fortuitous collection of cells lumped together and being pushed and pulled by other fortuitous collections of forces and cells, and behold—after an infinite number of reactions—the flower and the bee. Take the pollen-box of the pansy and the spathe and inflorescence of the wild arum. To say such cunning is the product of mere particles—chemical or electrical—whatever you choose to call them, things like marbles in a bag—shaken up and becoming what? Evolution by variation, by an infinite number of minute reactions. But why

variations? What began it? You don't paint a picture by pouring paint from pot to pot. Why a single green algal cell—and then a rose in full flower? Just a marvellous, coincidental muddle that somehow happened! A huge porridge of protoplasm becoming man! Why—how? Not even the hypothetical spoon allowed! All this marvellous co-ordination, this rhythm, this lovely scheming and cunning—just a blind boiling up of energy, or whatever the word may be. To me—it is the uttermost bosh. I postulate the Unknown Artist."

His mysticism could be humorous.

"Take Stella Lacey. A certain collection of organic matter called Gurney somehow coming into contact with other collections of organic matter called craftsmen, impinges with them upon certain masses of silicate of alumina, and sandstone and woody fibre—and behold—this House. The product of colloidal chemistry, or an agglomeration of electrons so arranging themselves—that a pattern arrives in consciousness! O, but you mustn't whisper the word—teleology. That is blasphemy against our new little cleverness."

Or again: "If I look down my microscope and observe a pollen tube worming its way to the ovum, and some pedant stands by me and says: 'O, yes, that's integration. When we get all the formulæ we shall see how the mechanism clicks. Intelligence, my dear chap. It's quite incredible. It just happens—without a head.' But isn't that attitude far more incredible than my so-called credulousness? Even your pedant will say: 'Nothing can come out of nothing.' Old Paley wasn't quite the obsolete fool. What is this state we call consciousness? Has it for us no significance as the complex pattern grows. Your pedant makes me think of a man sitting down to a good dinner, and having eaten it he denies the existence of the cook. 'The thing cooked itself.'"

Yes, Bonthorn was a reassuring person, when the loneliness in you doubted, and you complained of the lassitude of living.

"Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean;
Tears from the depth of some divine despair."

On this drenching day she walked with herself in the Long Gallery, up and down, up and down. It had twelve windows, and she would pause at a window and look out to see the green

world blurred by the greyness of the rain. Her mood was whimsical. Reality? The thing or its shadow? All this furniture, these pictures, portraits of the dead.

She paused below the picture of the Gurney in the White and Gold Brocade. That dress still survived; she had it smothered in tissue paper at the bottom of a drawer. Victor had worn that dress one Christmas before the war.

White and Gold Gurney and Victor were strangely alike. Both dead. But what was death?

She wondered. She sat down close to the Sedan chair by the fifth window counting from the west. That Sedan chair too had been Gurney, green and gold, and lined with pale blue silk. Some other Gloriana had sat in it and been carried by link-light to routs and levees and to Drury Lane. The ghost within a ghost! She rose again and walked up and down. Armour, pictures, a grotesque casque, crossed rapiers, a Queen Anne commode, two high-backed Charles II chairs.

A clock struck, and its voice was deep, rich and deliberate. It stood at the head of the stairs in its black-and-gold lacquer case, and for two centuries it had told the hours. It was less possessive than the clock in the cupola. Its cry was not "Mine, Mine, Mine," but "Doom, Doom, Doom."

She heard footsteps on the stairs. A maid appeared.

"Mr. Bonthorn, madam."

How strange! She stood with a hand to her cheek.

"Yes?"

"He wants to borrow a book, madam. He does not wish to bother you."

She smiled to herself.

"Ask Mr. Bonthorn to come up."

While the maid went for Bonthorn she walked to the western end of the Great Gallery and saw that there was a break in the sky, a crevice of tawny light. A long, yellow beam like a ray from the eye of God as shown in some strange old picture, touched one of the cedars and a part of one lawn. She stood to gaze, and then heard Bonthorn's footsteps and the ticking of the lacquer clock.

She saw him all brown against the wainscoting, and just above his head a gilded scone seemed to burn. The mystic! The man of to-morrow!

"Aren't you very wet?"

He came down the gallery towards her, and she thought that had she been a younger woman he would have moved her to other mysticism.

"Summer rain. I've come to borrow Reynold Green's book. I believe you have it?"

"I have."

"Something about the Chelsea Physic Garden, and old Hudson."

She sat down in the window-seat with its cushion of red brocade.

"You can take it home with you. Unless——"

He smiled.

"O—I don't read books in your presence."

"Thank you."

From that west window a part of the valley was visible, and under the glittering edge of the passing shower where the grey fringe met sunlight the Mill House at Monks Lacey looked like one of those minute toy houses set in glass. The chimneys and the green swell of the chestnut tree caught Bonthorn's attention, to the momentary exclusion of the Chelsea Physic Garden and its herbalists. A string of motor-coaches was passing along the road and over the bridge, like a file of blue, green, red and yellow beetles. The Mill House had always refused to deal with mass-production teas, and a white board warned the world:

"No char-a-bancs."

Bonthorn rested one knee on the cushioned seat.

"I suppose you have heard about the trouble at the Mill House?"

She had not heard it.

"One of those young women?"

He answered her rather quickly, as though to save her the folly of seeming flippant.

"Yes, rather a tragedy. One of the girls was riding pillion. A smash, and she was thrown off. Her back is badly injured."

"Not—permanently?"

"They seem to think so. Legs paralyzed."

"Which girl?"

"Do you remember our stopping with 'California' to watch a jumping-match? It was the girl we saw jumping."

She was studying his face as though she divined in him a compassion that was stronger than he knew.

"How tragic! A broken back?"

"Youth—with a broken back! Utterly wrong—somehow. No more play, no more fooling."

The lacquer clock struck the half-hour and its deep note was like the voice of the old house setting other human notes vibrating. Those sons of hers who had died in the war, youth cut off in the moment of flowering, like those larkspurs of Bonthorn's! And suddenly her face seemed to transcend time. She looked out of the window at a wet, green, glittering world.

"The poor mother! I suppose life can be pretty hard for such people."

Bonthorn nodded.

"Yes, theirs seems such a flimsy world. A sort of crowded scuffle. If your health goes—where are you?"

Chapter Twelve

I

ON HIS way back to Yew End Bonthorn called upon Mrs. Robinia.

The paved space outside the Mill House was deserted, save for half a dozen painted wooden tables cocked slantingly against each other to throw off the rain. A little breeze came down the valley, and the chestnut tree scattered moisture from its leaves and rejoiced in the returning sunlight. A wet and glimmering greenness everywhere. The tarred road steamed.

The tea-room door stood open. Bonthorn walked in and found the place deserted, but he heard sounds of hammering coming from the interior of the house. Also, he heard voices, and in particular Mrs. Buck's voice.

"I do believe I've hung it crooked again, Rhoda. Give me a line, my dear, will you. What—more to the left? I'll put in another nail."

There were more tappings, and then an exclamation. Mrs. Binnie had hit her finger.

"Well—really! That comes of being in a hurry. I've broken the skin—too."

"You'd better have it tied up."

"Perhaps I had. There's an old handkerchief in one of the drawers of the dresser. Top—left."

Bonthorn was wondering whether his intrusion was not superfluous with Mrs. Buck and her elder daughter so obviously occupied in domestic adjustments, but before he could put the feeling into action Rhoda came out from the little room on the right. She stood still and stared at him. For the moment she had supposed him to be someone in search of tea.

"O—Mr. Bonthorn!"

Almost her implication assumed that it was only Mr. Bon-

thorn, Old One Eye, though that one eye was but a year over forty. And Bonthorn apologized.

"No interference, I wanted to inquire——"

Rhoda's dark directness was somehow friendly. This man-creature was not unintelligent.

"That's all right. You mean—about my sister?"

"Yes."

But Mrs. Binnie had heard the voices, and not being able to resist the sound of voices, emerged with a bruised forefinger and a hammer. She had an air of moist activity, and hair—that from frequent pattings and smoothings—had chosen a provoked untidiness.

"O—Mr. Bonthorn!"

Her exclamation was more welcoming than Rhoda's. It did not suggest that it was only Old Bonthorn. She was a sociable creature, and in a crisis she was glad of social support, and Mr. Bonthorn's was a singular and attractive figure. He was so much the gentleman, and Mrs. Binnie belonged to a generation that had not felt itself admitting inferiority when admitting good manners.

Bonthorn was gently formal.

"I was explaining to Miss Buck that I came in to inquire—— But you are busy."

Mrs. Binnie understood him. She was never too busy to receive good will.

"Do sit down, sir, please. Yes, I've just hit my finger. I never was much use with a hammer, Mr. Bonthorn. My husband always said no woman could ever hit a nail on the head. Rhoda, my dear, get me that handkerchief."

Bonthorn, having laid his hat and book on a table, sat down, for it was plain to him that Mrs. Binnie wanted him to sit down.

"You see, Mr. Bonthorn, we're getting a room ready. It has to be on the ground floor. Poor Rachel——"

She too sat down, holding her finger erect like a candle.

"Poor Rachel will have to lie on her back. I lay on my back for six weeks—once, Mr. Bonthorn, and I know what it means. That was when I had phlebitis in my left leg. But, O—Mr. Bonthorn, sir, to lie on your back for ever and ever——! And Rachel was always such a child for movement, dancing and

running, never still—though without being restless—if you know what I mean?”

Rhoda returned with a neat strip cut from the old handkerchief.

“Hadn’t you better wash it, mother?”

“No, my dear—you see—it has stopped bleeding now. Just tie it up for me, will you.”

She continued to hold her finger erect while her daughter bandaged it, and she continued talking to Bonthorn.

“I was only thinking yesterday, sir, what a strange thing it was you should have brought that poor dog in here, with his back broken. And then my poor girl. Not too tight, my dear, please. But it’s all these machines, cars and aeroplanes, and everybody being in such a terrible hurry. Yes, everybody seems to be wanting to rush about, sir. That’s what makes me wonder about poor Rachel, I expect it’s harder to lie still these days, especially when you’re young. Thank you, my dear.”

Bonthorn was aware of the elder sister watching him from behind Mrs. Binnie’s chair. Did she mistrust his wisdom, or doubt the rightness of his touch? Or was he an encumbrance, wasting their time?

He said: “Life’s not easy for some of us. Perhaps it’s not meant to be too easy.”

Rhoda’s dark eyes embarrassed him. She had the air of youth questioning the platitudes of a previous generation. So much of the old humanism was musty and obsolete.

He glanced at her.

“Perhaps your daughter understands these things—better than we do.”

And Rhoda nodded at him.

“If you mean movement, Mr. Bonthorn, not getting stuck in old ruts. If you’ll excuse me——”

She turned and walked towards the kitchen, and Bonthorn rose, but Mrs. Binnie held up her bandaged finger.

“There’s no hurry, sir, really. It does one good to talk.”

Her glance went towards the kitchen door. It closed.

“That’s one of the queer things, Mr. Bonthorn. You talk to your children for years, and they chatter to you—and suddenly there’s a sort of dumbness. They stop talking to you. It’s like

something being cut off. Not that my girls aren't good girls, but there's something about growing up and growing old. We're different, I suppose, or we seem different."

Her small face was questioning, and Bonthorn tried to think of an answer.

"Perhaps that's only on the surface, Mrs. Buck. So, you are having your daughter here?"

"O, yes, sir. We're going to manage somehow. The district nurse is coming in to show me how to do things. I've got to have an electric battery—too. Dr. Carver's been so kind. No doctor could have been kinder. But it's a problem, Mr. Bonthorn, it's a problem. They tell me I must keep the poor child's legs alive—so to speak, but what about her mind, sir? That's what's worrying me. You can't massage a human soul, Mr. Bonthorn, can you? How to keep her amused—and interested! I lie awake at night—thinking of it, and worrying and worrying."

Yes, Mrs. Binnie's problem was very much a problem, and Bonthorn, who had turned aside and entered the house of these strangers with the idea of being merely kind, found himself feeling responsible. He began to understand Rhoda's dark, gliding exit, as though youth knew that for youth there could be no solving of such a problem. Stark finality, life caged and without things. He felt the silence of the room and heard the dripping of the chestnut leaves, and the drone of an approaching car. This wet, green England, so suddenly and strangely sad! But chiefly he was conscious of a small and perplexed face, and a bandaged finger held out stiffly. A little, obscure, dusty oddment of a woman who kept a tea-house, and had tragedy on her hands, and who in her quaint way had asked him an answerable question.

He temporized.

"Is there no hope of her getting better?"

He gathered from Mrs. Binnie's reply that the doctors were not very hopeful, and understanding the limitations of human prescience he did not blame them. Life, as described in the textbook, and life as studied in the field, are such different matters. The most prosaic of plants poses you. A seeming likeness, questioned relentlessly, melts into baffling unlikeness. How often he had accused some wild plant, even the humble buttercup, of

not being true to type. "Confound you, you're fooling me."

Man's knowledge was so relative, a charting of appearances, and here was this little woman holding in her hands a flower with a broken stem, and asking the world and herself what she was to do with it. Who could tell her? Certainly not a mere professor of botany. Possibly she would find out for herself. Things manifest themselves in their very mystery of growth, and not in words.

He spoke to her very gently.

"No one can tell you what to do, Mrs. Buck. Perhaps it's a question of feeling. One does the right thing without quite knowing how or why."

Her small face looked puckered and puzzled.

"In a blundering sort of way, sir?"

"No, not quite that. I spend a lot of time watching flowers and insects. Insects seem to do the right thing without knowing or worrying."

Robinia looked still more puzzled. Was Mr. Bonthorn comparing her to an insect? And to what sort of insect?

"I know I'm a bit of a bumble-bee, Mr. Bonthorn."

He smiled at her.

"You know what I mean by instinct?"

Yes, she knew that.

"I'm being quite a lecturer, Mrs. Buck. We say that we live by reason and by instinct. Reason helps us in some problems; in others—not at all. I have a feeling that in some of our difficulties—instinct is the guide."

She blinked her little eyes at him.

"Really—Mr. Bonthorn—I think I begin to see. Martha and Mary. Martha was a good woman about the house, but she hadn't something that Mary had. One should be a bit of Martha and a bit of Mary."

Bonthorn nodded, and added five words.

"The instinct of the mother."

And suddenly Mrs. Buck's small face seemed to clear. It lost its puzzled puckers. Her stiff forefinger, held erect, reminded Bonthorn of one of those mysterious and angelic fingers in a Leonardo picture.

"You've said it—Mr. Bonthorn. That's helped me, somehow. For, really, sir, one can't do more than that, can one? Just letting oneself go—so to speak—in loving and labouring. Like one of your insects. Though—does a bee love, sir? But there I am again asking silly questions—which no one can answer? I see just what you mean, sir. Worrying's a sort of selfishness. I've got to be just mother, a bit of Martha and a bit of Mary, but perhaps—more Mary."

Bonthorn stood up, and he seemed to stand in the presence of some mystery, just as he would stand at times in his garden, watching and wondering. The sentimental flower-man! He had read some of the new literature, and with a kind of amused compassion he had compared it to dung, an exhibition of culture in which the finality of the flower had not been demonstrated. Farmyard manure, and blood and bones were good, elemental stuff, but why concentrate on the elementals to the exclusion of petals, perfume, seed?

Sentiment? Sensibility? The mystical idiot who was accused of being on the side of the angels! Well—why not? Why ally yourself with faecal bacteria. Man transcends his cells.

He bent over Mrs. Binnie's small figure.

"That's it. Plenty of the Mary, with Martha in the background. If I can help in any way— But the inspiration is yours—"

She gave him her left hand.

"That's not unlucky, is it, Mr. Bonthorn? But you've helped me. You have—really."

II

Bonthorn went back to Yew End and asked his own Martha to answer the question. She had brought him in his very simple supper, bread and cheese and some fruit.

"What would you do with a bed-ridden girl, Martha?"

"Do? You mean about nursing, sir?"

"No. How could you keep her alive, interested in things?"

Few people can think impersonally, nor was Martha one of them. She was too rigid in her prejudices, too sure of her own yardstick, and of how things should be done.

"Amused, sir?"

"Yes."

"You are thinking of Miss Rachel Buck."

"I have been talking to her mother, Martha."

Martha stood by the door, erect and rather severe.

"It's all amusement these days, sir. In my day we were taught other ways. We got up in the morning thinking: 'What have I to do to-day?' These young things seem to say: 'What am I going to play at to-day?' Always the jam before the bread, Mr. Bonthorn."

Bonthorn cut himself a piece of cheese.

"Possibly. They don't feel so responsible—or they feel it—in a different way. But let's take this particular case."

"If she won't be able to use her legs, sir, I'd give her more to do with her hands."

"I see. Keep up the average of occupation. What sort of things would you give her to do?"

Martha reflected.

"Well, she could do all the household mending, couldn't she? And keep the books, and clean silver, and the knives."

"All day and every day, Martha? What about the play?"

"Books, sir, and pictures. And the gramophone and the wireless. They're great on the gramophone down at the Mill House."

Bonthorn balanced a piece of cheese upon a cube of bread.

"Dance music, Martha?"

"I suppose so, sir."

"Dance music when you cannot dance! Wouldn't that be rather tantalizing?"

Martha agreed that it might be so, but she asserted that life wasn't all jazz, and if the younger generation had degenerated into dancing maniacs, well—when trouble came—duty found you out. Martha still spoke of duties, in spite of Bernard Shaw.

"I guess she'll have terrible trouble with herself, Mr. Bonthorn. And her mother will have trouble—plenty. She'll have to learn to carry her cross."

Bonthorn became silent, and Mrs. Martha went back to her kitchen, but Bonthorn was not thinking of Rachel as carrying a cross, but of hanging upon one. That dreadful ache of the limbs, and aches of the heart, and the thirst—thirst for the sweet water of living.

III

The sun was in arms when Stella Lacey came down to the Mill House, the old to the seeming new.

Gloriana was met by Rhoda, a young woman with a tray and an air of uncompromising casualness. She stood her ground with tray on hip, as though to challenge and contradict a tradition. The great lady stuff! Patronage? Not likely!

"Miss Buck, I think. Is your mother in?"

Yes, Mrs. Buck was in but busy, and Rhoda showed no signs of recognizing Stella Lacey as Stella Lacey, though she had seen Mrs. Gloriana in the flesh dozens of times. What did the old woman want—anyway, butting in just when the Mill House was busy with teas?

"Anything important? You see, we are rather rushed just now."

Mrs. Gloriana was gently amused. How singular it was that each young generation should resemble an English spring on a day when the north-east wind is blowing. So raw, and aggressively new, as though no other springs had preceded it, and the serenity of September was an offence. She supposed too that Rhoda subscribed to the superstition that Stella Lacey expected servility, and could conceive of nothing but condescension. And the Rhoda world was not going to accept any lip from Stella Lacey.

Mrs. Gurney apologized.

"My dear, how inconsiderate of me. If you will tell me when Mrs. Buck will find it most convenient to see me."

Rhoda stared. Like many of those to whom the aristocrat is just idle rich, she was a little nonplussed when the silk touched her. My dear—indeed! Was this simplicity just other sidiness, a more subtle assertion of superiority?

"Oh—if you'll wait a moment, I'll go in and see."

"Thank you."

"What name?"

"Mrs. Gurney."

Rhoda stalked off with her tray, somehow resenting the silkiness of that presence. The self-conscious canvas of her young crudeness creaked. Mrs. Gloriana sat down on one of the

painted chairs among the partakers of tea, and Rhoda found her mother in the kitchen, cutting bread and butter.

"You've got a visitor. The old woman from Stella Lacey. I told her you were busy."

Mrs. Binnie put down the knife.

"What, Mrs. Gurney?"

"Yes."

"Well—really! What have you done with her, my dear?"

"Left her outside."

Mrs. Binnie looked shocked.

"Well—really! Haven't you more sense? What must she think of our manners?"

Mrs. Robinia hurried out to restore the situation, and with a sincerity that did not trouble about aprons. Stella Lacey left standing on the doorstep! What manners! For to Mrs. Binnie Stella Lacey still represented a creation that was singular and splendid.

"O—Mrs. Gurney, madam—I really must apologize——"

Gloriana had an instant hand for Mrs. Binnie.

"I should have reminded myself, Mrs. Buck, that you had people to look after."

"O, they can manage. Will you come in, madam?"

"May I? I wanted to ask about your daughter."

"O dear—yes, poor Rachel. Please come in, Mrs. Gurney. I know you won't mind our kitchen. Living-room and kitchen combined, you know."

Rhoda, passing out with a full tray, wondered why her mother was such a snob, while Mrs. Binnie was childishly innocent of any such feeling of inferiority. Didn't Rhoda know that Gurney was Gurney, and not Shelp or Shoddy? And as if the human heart did not love kings, and pageantry and soldiers in red coats, and beautiful behaviour. For—sometimes—a woman wishes to escape from her kitchen.

"Do take this chair, Mrs. Gurney. Yes, you see, I was cutting bread and butter."

Gloriana had observed certain things, the cleanliness of the place, the spotlessness of Mrs. Binnie's table. The conscientiousness of being clean, even when the world and worry harried you! She sat down.

"Please don't let me interfere. Please go on cutting bread and

butter. We can talk, can't we? I should so much like you to tell me about Rachel."

Mrs. Binnie blinked at her and became full of self-expression. Her knife and tongue were equally busy, and while the one spread butter, the other produced a working philosophy. It might be a little muddled in its metaphors and somewhat subjective, but it carried. Yes, everybody was being very kind. Yes, she was having her daughter back here; she would manage somehow.

"One does—somehow, madam, doesn't one—when one's put to it."

Mrs. Gloriana agreed.

"Hidden strengths—Mrs. Buck. And we go on cutting our bread and butter. Yes, all that is splendid."

Mrs. Binnie's eyes were a little moist.

"I'm not clever, you know, Mrs. Gurney, but I do try—really. There was talk of sending Rachel to a London hospital, but she was against it, though I would have managed somehow. But as I said to Dr. Carver: 'Be honest, doctor, would it be sure to do her any good, or do her more good than we can—here?' He wouldn't promise anything. So, the child's to have massage and electricity, and I'm learning all that I ought to know. The district nurse is going to show me things to begin with. Yes, we'll manage somehow."

Rhoda came in for supplies, looked at them both with a dispassionate curiosity, and went her way. And Mrs. Buck explained Rhoda to the gentlewoman.

"O, yes, she's a good girl. Rather abrupt and mannish. But they are like that—some of them—these days, Mrs. Gurney. Rhoda's all right inside. Rachel, poor dear, was never so quick off the mark as Rhoda. Gentler, you know. And—really—if you ask me, I like them gentler."

Again Mrs. Gloriana agreed.

"I'm trying to think, Mrs. Buck—of anything I can do. I have had my own troubles. As one woman to another—if anything occurs to you—I shall be grateful if you will let me know."

Mrs. Binnie held her knife poised over the butter.

"I'm sure I will. Let me see now. You don't happen to have one of those invalid tables, Mrs. Gurney, the sort that swings over the bed?"

"As a matter of fact I have one. I'll send it down."

"O, thank you, madam."

"And some books. Perhaps you will let me come and see Rachel when she comes out of hospital?"

"Really—I'll only be too glad, Mrs. Gurney. Really, if you don't mind me saying so—I'd just love to lie and listen to your voice—myself. Please excuse me—madam—but really—everybody's being so kind."

Chapter Thirteen

I

DIRECTLY opposite Rachel's bed in the women's ward at Lignor hospital a long window gave her a view of South Street, or rather of a section of South Street. She could see half the façade of the bootshop of Messrs. Freeman, Hardy & Willis, the whole of Bannister's the tobacconist and two-thirds of Messrs. Gilstrap & Grace, drapers. Every day she counted the number of windows and chimney-pots, and watched the people going in and out, and the traffic passing in South Street. She might have been far back in the pit of a theatre, watching things happening on a stage, and after all so very little happened.

That surprised her. She lay and wondered at South Street and at herself. Already, she was very weary of her bed, she—who was dead from the waist downwards, but so alive in heart and lips and eyes. She could not believe it; she did not believe it—though she had dared to ask Carver that most final of questions.

"Doctor, tell me the truth. Shall I always be like this?"

Gently, he had nodded his head at her, and she had closed her eyes, and caught her lower lip between her teeth, and saved herself from crying out: "It's impossible. It can't be so. I haven't lived yet." And then she had felt Carver's hand on her wrist.

"That's the worst. There is just a chance—that some of the power may come back."

She had kept her eyes closed.

"I wish I had been Geoff. All over—just nothing."

His hand had gripped her wrist.

"I know. But you'll find things get easier. Mercifully—they do."

But she did not believe it. To be alive and yet so helpless, to be washed and powdered and rubbed just like a baby, to feel your hands ready to grasp at life, while the lower part of you was

wax. Her incredulity was elemental. She had a feeling that she would wake one morning to find that movement had come back, suddenly and inevitably, and that her legs had become the legs of Rachel, and had ceased to be strange, unfriendly appendages. Each morning when consciousness returned her face would wear a look of excitement and of hope. She would strain a little and watch the bed-clothes. Then a kind of spasm would distort her face. She was the same as yesterday, a prisoner. And life seemed to contract, and to become no more spacious than the glimpse she got of Lignor through that high window.

She had her visitors, and especially her mother, who came wearing quite a coquettish little hat and the brightest of manners.

"Well, really—my dear, I've never seen you look so handsome."

Which was true, for already Rachel's comeliness had had its curves and its colours subtilized. Petulant and sweet. Something large and elusive in the eyes, a prophetic sadness.

Mrs. Binnie brought flowers.

"When you come home, Rachel, you can arrange all the vases."

"And do all the mending, mumsie."

"Oh—I don't know about that. But people have been so kind, my dear. I had Mr. Bonthorn to see me. He's a most wonderful man, my dear, he is—really."

"Old One Eye!"

"And who do you think came yesterday? Mrs. Gurney. She's going to send us down a table and books."

Rhoda was less consoling than her mother. She seemed to bring the vigour and the verve and the forcefulness of her youth to the edge of Rachel's bed. She was the young priestess of pragmatism. Her very stride was tantalizing to Rachel, making her feel that she—as a creature of adventure and eagerness—was finished.

Rachel was a little frightened of Rhoda. The determination of those eyebrows, the compression of those lips! What was Rhoda thinking? How was she welcoming all the extra work, the drudgery, the interference of stupid circumstances? Would Rhoda resent it all, Rhoda whose patience was not her particular virtue?

"I'm so sorry, Rho. It's rather rotten for you."

"Don't you worry, my dear. We'll manage."

"But what about Fred?"

"Fred's a bit of a philosopher. After all, I don't know that I am in such a furious hurry. Marriage is an all-time job."

But Rhoda asked more questions than Mrs. Binnie, and asked them more pertinently and with an air of critical foresight. Was Rachel satisfied with these local doctors? Yes, the X-ray photographs may have been negative so far as bone displacements were concerned, but—after all—London was the place. Rhoda had heard of cases in which injured spines had been operated upon with quite excellent results. She could not produce the word "Laminectomy," but she understood the procedure.

Rachel lay and wondered. Did Rhoda want to get her to London for other reasons?

"Dr. Carver is against it, Rho. And so is Dr. Spence."

Rhoda might have asserted that she thought Dr. Carver rather an old woman. She said: "Well, I think any chance ought to be followed up. If you have something pressing on your spinal cord—obviously—something might be done."

Rachel looked wistful.

"But they don't think it is pressure, Rho. They think I fell all doubled up. Ordinarily the bones would have come apart, but in my case—they didn't."

Evidently, Rhoda was not satisfied. She may have had a feeling that Rachel was taking her tragedy lying down, and that more stimulation might be necessary, but she said no more to Rachel. She did speak to Dr. Carver and to her mother, with the result that an eminent neurologist who happened to visit Lignor to report upon another of Carver's patients, saw Rachel, and examined her. He agreed that it was a curious case, and that the results of operative interference might be problematical. Also he was not knife-mad.

"Watch her. Keep the legs in condition—of course. What is her own feeling about it?"

"She wants to go home."

The neurologist was not a pedant.

"After all—a patient's predispositions do count. And environment. I'd just watch her, Carver, for six months. It seems per-

fectly plain that there is no pressure by displaced vertebræ. A ruptured cord, rare, but probable."

Young Tanrock came to see Rachel. He was shy and kind, and rather inarticulate. He sat by her bed and smiled at her reassuringly.

"I'm going to work out a patent go-cart for you, Rache. I've got the idea. We'll put it through in the machine-shop."

She liked Fred Tanrock by her. He could sit quite still, and she liked to look at his capable, brown hands.

"How kind of you, Fred. Shall I be able to work it myself?"

"Rather. Low-gearred hand-levers. And steering. You'll get quite nippy about the place."

Her eyes moistened.

"Fred—I've such a horror—of being useless, a drag on them."

Young Tanrock patted her hand.

"Don't you worry, old girl. Rhoda's got the stuff in her. And as for the mater——"

"Mother's—mother's marvellous. Oh, it hurts me, Fred."

"That's because you've got the stuff in you too, Rachie. Don't you worry, old thing."

II

But there came a morning when Rachel had what might be described as an attack of life-terror. She had been lying looking out of that window at the too-familiar shop-fronts and at the traffic and people passing in South Street, and it had seemed to her that she was looking through a slit in a fence, and that the slit was growing narrower and narrower.

The nurse on duty heard herself called.

"Nurse—nurse——"

She saw a hand up, its fingers fluttering, and she went towards the bed.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Can I have the blind down, the blind over that window?"

"Why? The sun's not shining on you."

"Do pull it down, nurse."

"But—what about the other patients?"

"Nurse—I can't bear that window. It's—it's just like a hole in a wall."

"My dear, pull yourself together."

And then Rachel had what the nurse described to Dr. Carver as an attack of hysteria. She wept; she cried out like a child, she pleaded. She poured out a tumult of words. "O, please—pull down the blind. I'm frightened. Don't you understand—? That window's like a door that's being shut on me. Just a slit of light— O, please pull down the blind. I don't want to look at that beastly window." A screen had to be put round her bed, while the other patients exchanged glances and significant murmurings. "Poor kid, she's got the terrors on her." "Well, you can't wonder, can you, if she's a bit hysterical." "It's come over all of a sudden-like." They heard her moaning and sobbing behind the screen. "I want to die. Why didn't they let me die? O, mother, mother!"

The nurse went for the sister in charge, and the sister, having tried without success to calm Rachel, telephoned to Dr. Carver. She managed to get in touch with him at the house of a patient.

"O, doctor, sorry to trouble you, but the Buck girl is hysterical. Quite uncontrollable. Shall I give her a dose?"

Carver's voice replied.

"No. I'll come along when I've finished here."

"She's disturbing the other patients, sir. I hate a scene in a ward. We've put a screen round her bed."

"I'll be with you in twenty minutes."

When he appeared from behind the screen and sat down on the edge of Rachel's bed, she put out a hand like a child asking to grasp something solid and reassuring.

"O, doctor—I'm so sorry."

"That's all right, Rachel. Tell me all about it."

"I couldn't. It's so silly. I'm better now."

"Nothing is silly, my dear. Everything has a meaning. Now, you just tell me. Get it off your soul."

"It was that window. I've been lying here looking at it and out of it—for days and days. You can't see very much, and I have had such a lot of time to think about things, and sometimes I have heard a voice saying: 'That's all you will see in the future, a bit of street and people going to and fro.' It got on my nerves, doctor, until I was afraid of the window. It made me

feel that I was going to spend my life looking through a slit like that."

Carver understood.

"I know. And you felt a kind of rage against that window. Well, we must do something about it."

"I shan't behave like that again."

"I shan't give you the chance to, Rachel. You want a change. What about the Mill House? I think they are ready for you."

Her eyes expressed relief.

"Could I go? It's different down there, Dr. Carver."

"Of course."

"You mustn't think me an ungrateful little beast. Everybody has been so good to me here. But everything here seems part——"

"I know. Associations. I shall be passing the Mill House this afternoon. I'll see your mother."

Her face looked all smoothed out.

"Thank you. And I want to apologize to Sister Burt."

"Supposing I do it for you?"

"You do understand things, doctor."

"Well, if I didn't, my dear, I shouldn't be worth calling a doctor. But so many of us don't."

She smiled at him as he passed out from behind the screen, and he returned to the day's work thinking how the child emerged in moments of stress and of sickness. Here was a grown woman ashamed of an emotional outburst, and crying for her mother. Yes, that might be very natural, but the child's woe was to be laid in Mrs. Binnie's lap for love and for labour. And who would encourage and console the child in Mrs. Binnie, that small courageous, tremulous creature who fell into panics and out of them? Rachel was asking to go to her mother, but did the child in her realize all that her mother would have to do and to bear?

III

Robinia had the room ready. She took Dr. Carver in to see it, and to criticize any of her arrangements, but Dr. Carver found nothing to question, save that the window looked out on the road and was somewhat overshadowed by the mass of the

chestnut tree. Mrs. Binnie had placed the bed near the window, and her bright eyes watched Dr. Carver's face.

"It's quite a cheerful room, don't you think so, doctor?"

Most certainly it had all the cheerfulness that Mrs. Binnie's love and her finances had been able to supply, rose-coloured curtains, and a buoyant carpet bought second-hand, and bright prints from sundry periodicals hung on the biscuit-coloured walls. Mrs. Binnie had even provided a wash-hand-stand and a chest of drawers as though to suggest to Rachel a nice normality.

"You see, doctor, I arranged the bed there so that she could look out and see things. Of course—there's the traffic on the road, but she may like to watch things passing. And if you stand just there and put your head down you can see the river and the park."

Dr. Carver stood just there.

"Splendid. Quite a view."

"And it's just clear of the draught when the door's open. Yes, I've got the air-mattress. Tibbits of Lignor expect to deliver the battery this week."

"I'll come and show you how to use it."

"And this table, doctor. Mrs. Gurney sent it down. I don't see why we shouldn't manage—famously."

He looked very kindly at her small face.

"There are one or two things I want to say. They have got to be said, Mrs. Buck. You'll have plenty on your hands. Now—scrupulous cleanliness—back and heels, or there will be bed-sores. You see, in cases like this—the nutrition of the skin and its feeling are upset. Then—those other matters——"

She listened to him with an air of bright docility.

"Yes—I understand, doctor. I'll see to everything. It's like having a baby to look after, poor dear."

Her face had a sheen to it, and Carver, saluting the little splendour of her, forced himself to further frankness.

"Now, Mrs. Buck, you are being great—in every way. Just one thing, if you can see her as a child, remember to see her as a woman."

Mrs. Binnie blinked at him.

"Children have moods."

"Of course, doctor."

"And women have moods. I have a feeling that she will want to help in every way she can. Let her help. Try to find her things to do. Make them up—if necessary. She's a live girl in a partly paralyzed body. But you understand all right."

Mrs. Binnie sat down for a moment on the bed. Her little face was tragically serious.

"Dr. Carver—I know—I'm going to have—O—yes—bad times with her. When one's had children——The young things think sometimes that we old ones don't know anything. As if we hadn't lived and bit our tongues and felt like nothing on earth—now and again. I've got through it, and please God—I'll go through it again."

Dr. Carver nodded his head at her, pulled out a silk handkerchief and blew his nose.

"O, yes, you'll do it, all right. I just had to mention these things. Well, that's all, I think. And remember, I'm always at hand when you want me."

IV

Bonthorn, passing down the lane and over the bridge about sunset, saw the chestnut tree half in light and half in shadow. The Mill House had fed its flock for the day, and almost St. Tarmac folded his hands and lay in peace. The green of the valley had a tinge of gold in it, especially the slopes of Stella Lacey where the Scotch pines warmed their red throats in the sunlight.

Rhoda was collecting cloths from the painted tables, whisking them off, and folding them up with deft movements, before going in to help her mother with the washing up. She gave Bonthorn a cursory but friendly smile.

"How's your sister, Miss Buck?"

"We expect her home to-morrow."

"I'm glad."

Having dealt with the cloths she began to pile the tables in twos, for the Bucks had found that these tables were a temptation to the world. They had to be carried to the old wheel-house of the mill beyond the chestnut tree and stacked there for the night.

"You don't have to move all those tables, do you?"

Her glance was ironical.

"O, don't we! Some pirate on a lorry pinched four of them one night. At least—we suppose it was a lorry."

"The damned scoundrel!"

"Yes, I should like to have caught him."

"You would. Let me give you a hand."

"O, don't bother."

"Why not?"

He picked up a pair of the tables.

"Where do they go?"

"Over there—in the old wheel-house."

Her glance was appraising, but there was no freshness in Mr. Bonthorn, and she passed him as a kind of avuncular oddity. She supposed that he supposed he was doing the gentlemanly thing, and without any obvious claims upon her youth. Some men were useful.

"Thanks—so much."

Bonthorn had dealt with the first load and was returning for a second, when Robinia appeared in the doorway and discovered him in the act of moving furniture.

She exclaimed: "Really, Mr. Bonthorn, sir, you mustn't do that. You mustn't—really."

His one eye was whimsical.

"Think of me as a boy scout, Mrs. Buck. I hear your daughter is coming home to-morrow."

"Yes, poor dear."

"I'll send you down some flowers."

Chapter Fourteen

I

THERE were people who wondered how Nicholas Bonthorn made a living, curiosity as to one's neighbour's financial status being as prevalent as those hypothetical essences vice or virtue.

The Inland Revenue officials knew. Ex-Captain Bonthorn drew a disability pension and a wound pension. Also, he possessed a small private income of his own derived from some five thousand pounds invested in trustee stock. The officials knew the amount to a penny.

II

For, after all, man's social pomposities are supremely funny, and so are his budgets and his set-speeches and his political occasions. And his disinterested gestures! Altruism, ethics! Some genial old ass rising at a dinner-table and assuring the exploited masses that the best of all possible worlds shall be produced for them by legislation in the course of the next ten years.

Bonthorn pondered these matters as he gathered flowers, for even flowers have to be worked for, and will not spring into sudden profusion in obedience to a legislative decretal. And seeing Old Mischief toddling along with a hoe, he called to him and propounded a question.

"John, have you ever performed a disinterested act?"

Jack screwed up his puck's eyes.

"That be a long word, Mr. Bonthorn."

"Well, what's your idea of it?"

"Some'at like this, sir. If I have a pouch o' baccy, and I give the 'ole pouch away to a chap with a pipe and no baccy."

"Do you ever do that, John?"

"No, sir, t'aint sense. I give he a fill."

"Just explain. It's partly good nature and sympathy, and per-

haps a little of the notion that you'll get a free fill back again some day."

Old John chuckled.

"Sure—there's a bit of all that in it. But for why don't I give the 'ole pouch away? Easy come, easy go. If you start giving pouches away—you'll be teachin' people to expect free pouches. Human nature's human nature. Most of t'world, sir, would like free pouches."

"You think so?"

Osgood leaned on his hoe.

"Sure, don't we know it. But we 'ave to pretend, sir. We 'ave to 'ave our parsons and our police constables—but t'parson's dead, sir, or nearly so. Instead we have the politician. Parson promised 'em hell or heaven. Politician promises 'em heaven on earth, free meals, no kids to keep, free everything."

Bonthorn laughed.

"But they are making a kind of religion of it, John."

"Just blindness, sir. They want the goods and the cash, but just like t'parson they have to dress up in a surplice, and put on a queezy, solemn sort of voice. Don't you believe it, Mr. Bonthorn?"

"I don't, John."

"It's all part of t'game, sir. Forfeits. Man's such a clever creature at dressin' up and usin' long words. He likes t'feel good with hisself. If he can feel good with hisself and same time get t'goods, he's in heaven. Them as aren't worth so much in value—want to take the stuff from them as 'as more value, but they want to feel good and righteous about it."

"How would you feel about it, John?"

Osgood grinned.

"Don't you be for temptin' I, Mr. Bonthorn. Besides, I've got a little more money put by than t'neighbours, and they know it. Call I an ol' miser—I guess! Envy may pull man right or it may pull man wrong."

"Nothing but envy, John?"

A wicked eye fixed him.

"O, I guess you could find a nicer word, sir. But, you see, I've growed stuff all my life. Maybe I've growed more than my neighbours. Fur that reason I be'unt so popular as I might be.

Wid a little more spit and polish and a shiny 'at—I might be idle rich, you know."

Bonthorn took his flowers, a true country bundle of asters, gaillardias and stocks, to the potting shed, and looked for a hank of bass. Obviously, old John had no illusions as to the disinterestedness of democracy. Man is an envious animal, and the more sagacious ancients had sought to sublimate envy and to christen the product emulation. He found his bass and wound it about the stalks, and looked at his bundle of flowers in the mass. But out of the soil came reality, the reality that old Osgood understood, effort, labour, watchfulness, pride, the bent back and the sedulous hoe. Weeds—too! And how had man evolved his best other than by watching a massed crop for some singular individual, and selecting that individual and breeding from it, and giving the chosen progeny every encouragement. Singularity, aloofness, leisure. Who dared to teach these truths?

He set off through the garden with his flowers, and in the lane it occurred to him to wonder how these professors of economics and those glib young lecturers would fare were they taken from their class-rooms and bundled into a world of reality, to create work and food for these masses of men? Doubtless it all looked so easy from the doctrinaire's chair. Economic man! That absurd person was dead—but in his place one had social man. Did the theorists imagine that they had altered man by tagging the word social to him? And what sort of mess were these new egoists going to make of reality?

They would run their heads against the Slavonic wall. They would be compelled to create other tyrannies. Possibly that was part of their plan, the enthronement of official egotism.

He arrived at the bridge and stopped to look at the river, and here he forgot the fret of theories. The wind in the willows, the trembling of the sedges. The chestnut tree had its foliage gently ruffled like the breast of a bird. O, these social altercations, these scoldings! Was he responsible for them, or was he just responsible for getting on with his own job and minding his own business?

A world of furious administrators administering other people's business until nothing should be left but a feather duster and administration!

He turned towards the Mill House, and finding the door open, he—tactfully—knocked.

III

Mrs. Robinia was busy, but she was never too busy to talk, or too tired to refrain from it, and when she saw Mr. Bonthorn and his flowers she wanted him to come in.

"Well—really, Mr. Bonthorn, it—is—kind of you. Aren't they just lovely!"

She had to fetch a vase immediately and put the flowers in water.

"Yes, I'm catching the two o'clock bus to Lignor, and I'm coming back in the ambulance with Rachel. I'll put the vase in her room."

Her simplicity was such that it took other people by the hand and introduced them to her particular affairs as though they grew in a garden. She paused in the doorway of Rachel's room, and looked brightly at Bonthorn.

"Yes, we've had to put her downstairs. Everything's ready. It's quite a sweet little room. Would you like to see it?"

Bonthorn, hat in hand, walked to the door and looked at the room of Rachel. The chestnut tree seemed to tinge its atmosphere with a soft greenness.

Mrs. Binnie placed the vase on Mrs. Gloriana's table.

"There! That's lovely."

She stood off and gazed, her head on one side, and Bonthorn knew that he wanted to say something because she was expecting it.

"I think the room's charming."

Mrs. Binnie was delighted.

"Really—I'm so glad. I've been busy at it for quite a week. It isn't as though I could give all my time to a thing. I have to keep on my feet, Mr. Bonthorn, and I do believe my poor head's always just in front of my feet."

He looked at her very kindly.

"You do your job, Mrs. Buck."

That seemed to amuse her. She gave him a glance that was almost arch. Obviously she was excited about Rachel's home-coming and all her preparations, and her particular surprises.

"I do keep moving, Mr. Bonthorn, but then—life—does keep you moving these days, doesn't it? Now do come and have a glass of my home-made lemonade. Real lemons, not nasty powders."

The glass of lemonade was inevitable. She had to be allowed her gesture. So he sat down in one of the basket chairs, and accepted the glass and her conversation.

"I'm afraid I'm keeping you."

"No, really. I'm used to doing two things at once, Mr. Bonthorn."

She brought the other thing into the living-room, a baking-tray full of cakes, rock cakes as a matter of fact, and these cakes had to be put away in tins. He watched her, and drank his lemonade. It was very good lemonade, and he said so.

"Well, it should be, Mr. Bonthorn. I believe in giving people something for their money."

Her hurried hands looked as though they would drop things, but they didn't.

"I suppose even cakes have moods, Mrs. Buck?"

"Moods! You couldn't imagine the cussedness of cakes on occasions, sir. No, really. Just when you're busy too. As though they and the oven had a spite on you."

She chattered on, and it occurred to him to wonder what the ethical result would be were some official interferer to enter this most human house and dispense social amelioration. "Harmony, Mrs. Buck. Be at ease. No more degrading labour or anxiety. You will receive so much a week as a dole. The doctor's bill will be paid. Your daughter will be supplied with every possible gadget and convenience. Sit down, my good woman, and fold your hands and cease from worrying. The State will provide."

And Bonthorn finished his lemonade. Would Mrs. Binnie be any the happier? In fact would she not be far less happy, a little well-fed person whose essential self would starve and shrivel up, just because the more subtle essence was denied it? Giving, spending, contriving, the eternal human struggle. She would be like a very vital creature forcibly retired from the more mysterious business of living.

He said something of the kind to her.

"I don't believe you'd like life half so well, Mrs. Buck, if you had plenty of time to sit about in a chair."

For a moment her small face looked puzzled.

"You mean—if I hadn't got trouble biting me—so to speak?"

"Exactly."

She put her head on one side.

"Well, really, Mr. Bonthorn, I've sometimes thought I'd like to lie in bed half the day, and once or twice I've tried it. But before long I began to fidget. I did—really. Now isn't that strange?"

Chapter Fifteen

I

THE driver of the ambulance closed the door, and Mrs. Binnie, alone with her daughter for the first time, bent over Rachel and kissed her.

"O, my darling—I've got you back."

Rachel closed her eyes. She too was suffering from too much emotion, and her mother's excitement was like a strong light when eyes feel hot and tired. She lay on the stretcher with a grey blanket folded neatly over her. That short journey on the stretcher from the ward to the ambulance had been so very small an adventure, with one man at her head and another at her feet, carefully carrying her down the stairs. She had said good-bye to the hated window, to the nurses, to the other patients. Some of them had stood at the door of the ward and had said kind things. But never before had she been so conscious of her own helplessness.

"Sit down, mumsie."

Mrs. Binnie sat down rather suddenly, and not of her own free will, for the ambulance moved off and swung round to negotiate the hospital gateway.

"Well—really!"

She sat there and looked at her daughter, and though Rachel's eyes were closed she had a feeling that she was being looked at by her mother, and her self-control—brittle as thin ice—found the weight of that affectionate scrutiny almost too heavy. Also, the ambulance had been standing in the sun, and was as stuffy as an unventilated tent. A faint smell pervaded it suggestive of disinfectant.

Rachel opened her eyes, to find her mother's eyes fixed on her, and inwardly, she winced and resented that scrutiny. The silence between them was as heavy as the air in the little closed compartment.

"Your hat's crooked, mother."

It was. And Mrs. Binnie exclaimed: "Is it, my dear? Well, never mind." She sat and smiled at her daughter, and again Rachel's eyes closed. Her self-control seemed to be smothering in the presence of a supreme devotion.

"It's very stuffy, mumsie. Couldn't we have a window open?"

Mrs. Binnie got up and fiddled with a ventilator, but not very successfully so.

"Yes, it's so hot to-day. Drat the thing! Well, we shan't be long, not much more than ten minutes."

The ambulance, oiling its way along at twenty miles an hour, brought them to Monks Lacey and the Mill House as the clock at Stella Lacey was striking three, and to Rachel the voice of that clock was to become ever present and familiar, like some edge of metal cutting the useless hours and letting them fall with a faint, sad clangour. The ambulance door opened, and she saw faces, Rhoda's, Fred Tanrock's. Her sister's face had a kind of sternness, set lips, straight brows, the face of youth confronting crowded occasions. And when Rachel saw her sister's face something shrank in her.

Mrs. Binnie bustled out, impulsively cheerful, her hat still more awry.

"Well, here we are. It's kind of you, Fred, very kind."

Tanrock smiled at her. He had come down from Lignor on a motor-bicycle to help with the lifting.

The driver of the ambulance took charge, and Mrs. Binnie hurried in to make sure that everything in that precious room was in order, and that the bed-clothes were turned back. She had left everything in order before catching the red bus, but her life was so supremely a scuffle that she had got into the way of running round in circles and patting and pushing things as though nothing would ever stay put.

The ambulance man took the head of the stretcher, Fred Tanrock the foot, and as Rachel was carried past the post and chains and the array of tables, she noticed that all the tables were laid for tea. The inevitable teas! And Rhoda's set face seemed to explain itself, and the determined striding of Rhoda's long legs. The stretcher passed through the familiar doorway,

and Rachel saw that a bell had been hung beside the doorway, and a neat little white board fastened to the wall.

"Ring—please."

An improvisation, a proposal to save time and tissue owing to the uselessness of one pair of legs. She closed her eyes for a moment, and felt the slight swaying of the stretcher, but behind her closed lids she was seeing all those other chairs and tables arranged in the tea-room. They suggested tense activities, hurrying with trays and dishes, the scufflings to find change for an inconsiderate pound note, clamours for hot water, swift exits and entries. How she had learnt to swing in and out among those tables and keep a pleasant face——! But all that was dead, though doubly urgent in the lives of two other women. She opened her eyes again and found herself in the little room, and looking at Fred Tanrock's solid back. A soft, greenish light, a pause, a blob of colour on a table, white sheets, a yellow bed-spread half-turned back.

She heard the voice of the ambulance man.

"Ready—lower."

The stretcher sank. It rested on the ground. The two men up-rising stepped aside and looked at Mrs. Binnie.

"We'd better lift her for you, ma'am. Is the bed ready?"

Mrs. Binnie turned back the clothes, and the ambulance man explained just how the thing had to be done. The four of them would be needed to do it properly. The stretcher should be placed on a couple of chairs, and level with the bed, and then the four of them would gently support and transfer Rachel from stretcher to bed. It was done, with Rachel very conscious of those four serious faces and of her own flaccid helplessness.

The ambulance-man's eyes expressed relief.

"That's it. Good luck, Miss."

He went out with the closed stretcher, followed by Fred Tanrock, while Mrs. Binnie and Rhoda saw to sundry details. Then, Rhoda disappeared, and Rachel and her mother were alone together.

"Quite comfortable, Rachie?"

"Quite."

"It makes a nice little room, doesn't it?"

She was aware of that expectant, small face, and of the effort life required of her.

"It's lovely, mumsie, so pretty."

"And those flowers. Mr. Bonthorn left them for you."

"Did he?"

"Everybody's so kind. Now, you just rest and have a little sleep, and then I'll bring your tea in."

She bent over her daughter and kissed her, and Rachel's hands clasped her mother's head.

"O, you dear. I wish——"

"There—there."

Mrs. Binnie hurried to the door, and Rachel made a pretence of closing her eyes, but she was aware of that small figure pausing in the doorway to look back, while it fumbled with a handkerchief. Then the door closed gently, and Rachel was alone.

She lay and stared at the wall opposite.

"How am I going to bear it? I must bear it."

II

On one side of her Bonthorn's flowers, on the other—the window. Her consciousness seemed to shape itself to the oblong of the window. It was a sash-window, painted white, broader than it was high, and the lower sash was raised. Her pillowed head was a little higher than the sill. She could see the trunk of the chestnut tree, and its lower branches, a slip of the paved terrace, three white posts and two black chains, and some fifteen yards of tarred road. But this window was kinder in some respects than the window up at Lignor. Its vista broadened and was not abruptly curtailed by bricks and mortar. It gave her distance, a glimpse beneath foliage of the chestnut of a loop of the river, and the willows and a piece of meadow. Also, by looking to the right she could command a little panel picture of the high ground and the sky, the slopes of Stella Lacey, a group of Scotch pine, some clouding beeches, even the black spire of one of the Stella Lacey cedars. The little landscape shimmered in the August heat, but the shadows were cool under the tree, and she could hear the water falling at the weir.

Her new world, but like the new world it seemed to hang upon the black reality of the road. For a while she was not very conscious of the road. Her impressions had floated beyond it and merged themselves into the more mysterious distances, nor had she as yet mastered all the details of the room. The very near things seemed far away. Moreover, the road was enjoying one of those curious spells of temporary and fallacious peace. For twenty minutes it was strangely innocent of traffic. Its polished tarmac had a glistening, ironic grin.

Then, something rumbled to the bridge, bringing with it a kind of spume of voices. The old house quivered. A char-a-banc went by trailing paper streamers, brimful of humanity. Shoutings, a mouth-organ squeaking, a young man wearing a pink lamp-shade on his head, a girl taking a pot-shot with a banana skin at one of the Mill House tables. The red rump of the great bulk disappeared with something trailing behind it, a nude rubber doll attached to a string.

Rachel's eyes seemed to open wider. The road was the reality, and the slopes of Stella Lacey no more than a green canvas backing. She was as much ears as eyes. And behind the monster that had vanished came one of those strange streams of patiently impatient progress, cars—nose to tail, with motor-bicycles swerving in and out, a procession, a kind of jointed, mechanical snake. Detonations, hootings, smells, sudden surges, the splurge of some more pushful machine swerving out and cutting in. The squealing of brakes. Car after car, cars of all sorts and of all sizes, cars with strange luggage roped untidily to luggage-grids, a car that had deck-chairs and a push-cart loaded anyhow in the back seats, cars with young men in shirt-sleeves, blue cars, red cars, brown cars, yellow cars, endless coloured streaks. And suddenly she found herself tired of gazing at them. It was like watching the painted slats of a moving fence. She blinked and closed her eyes.

III

The rhythm of the road changed. The long queue behind the char-a-banc was worming its way up to Lignor, and cars passed individually at the rate of one every fifteen seconds,

but the pause was relative, for the noise of an approach grew on the heels of the diminishing departure. She lay with her eyes closed. Never in her active days had she realized the dominance of this world upon wheels. It had a kind of mechanical inevitableness; it went on and on; you could not stay it, or diminish it. It was like perpetual motion as expressed by a huge clock-work train, a symbol of the crowded, complex urge of modernity.

A voice in her complained. "I wish it would stop. O, I wish it would stop."

A portion of the procession humoured her. Cars were pulling up. Brakes squeaked, doors banged, the air was full of voices. The Mill House hour had begun. She heard that new bell clanging. And the voices sounded so near to her, so raw and loud and cheerful.

"Four teas, Miss, please."

"What ho! girls."

"Mustn't swing on the chains."

"Here, mind my new trousers!"

She had a glimpse of a pair of long, beige-coloured legs in motion, and the black loop of a chain swaying to and fro. The owner of the legs had a blue silk handkerchief round her neck, and her face was crimped with mischief. Rachel closed her eyes again. She could remember sitting on that very chain, and exchanging patter with Geoffrey Hanson.

The door opened and Robinia hurried in with a tray, and so full of solicitous haste that her hair seemed to be slipping back as though her small face was leaving it behind.

"Rush just beginning, Rachie. Got you your tea first, dear. Now, we'll try Mrs. G's table."

She put the tray on the chest of drawers, removed Bonthorn's flowers to a corner of the window-sill, swung the table across the bed, and placed the tray on it.

"There. You'll be able to manage, won't you?"

"O, splendidly. You're not to worry, mumsie."

"Business as usual, Rachie. We've got Gladys in helping."

She turned the teapot so that the handle would come readily to Rachel's fingers, kissed the top of her daughter's head, and bolted like a small brown rabbit.

Mrs. Binnie had taken special care in the preparation of that

tea-tray, and had found time to cut six small cucumber sandwiches, and then had forgotten the sugar. That piece of forgetfulness brought a smile to Rachel's face, even though she had no power of her own to remedy the omission. What did sugar matter? There were so many things that she would have to learn to do without while Mrs. Binnie and Rhoda were attending to business. Moreover, the outer world was so very near to her that almost she could imagine herself taking her tea in public. The nearest tables were just out of view, hidden by the edge of a curtain, but if she could not see them she could hear them.

A very cheerful party had settled itself at two of these tables, four young men and four young women. They were full of patter. One of the young men was the obvious wit, a very facetious fellow with a ruff of fair hair, and spectacles straddling a little snub nose, an untidy young man whose white canvas shoes were dirty, and whose grey flannel trousers looked as though they were extracted from a rag-bag each morning.

"Pass the herbache, Gertie."

He was a dreadfully facetious young man. His open collar flapped, his hair flapped, his untidy trousers were in sympathy.

"Two cubes and one isosceles—if you please. Try the herbache, Bert. Wilfred's hour."

Someone remarked upon the rock cakes.

"Quite the antique touch, what!"

"Where's my little hammer? Fossils inside 'em. Fresh from the tomb of that Egyptian blighter."

"Gus is quite historic."

"Name—name."

"Tutan—what?"

"Tutan—carmen. Look it up in the *Daily Bilge*."

Rachel could visualize the facetious fellow. She had seen so much and so many of the genus, and actually she did see him in the flesh, for one of the young women scuffled with him for a box of matches and, getting possession, threw the box at his head. It missed him and landed under the chestnut tree, and the young man, getting up to recover it, discovered the window and Rachel. He gave her a momentary and owl-like stare, a cigarette casually pendent from the corner of a wet pink mouth.

He disappeared. His facetiousness became *sotto voce* and mysterious.

"Say—Bert, old lad, go and peek-week in at that window."

Bert was tempted, and came back with a sly snigger. Being questioned, he referred the matter back to Augustus.

"Peek, Freat."

"Young person in pink—all abed with a tea-tray."

"Shut up, Gus."

"A real live chocolate-box houri."

"O, shut up. Cheese it."

There were giggles.

The rhythm changed. The eight young things departed, somehow crowding themselves into two small cars that made much ostentatious and unnecessary noise in attempting to exaggerate their sense of horse-power. Prump, prump! The tables were reoccupied by a more domesticated party. Rachel heard Rhoda taking orders.

"Come and sit here, Milly."

"I want to sit by far-ther."

"Clarence—leave that spoon alone. Put your cap straight."

"Got any jam, Miss? Strawberry?"

"I think I'll take an egg, Tom."

"Two eggs, please, Miss."

"Don't boil 'em too hard."

"Can I have an egg, Ma?"

"No, you can't, so there. You had too much tinned salmon for lunch."

"I didn't."

"Don't argue. Put your cap straight."

Rachel had finished her tea, and swung the swivelled table to one side. She could hear all the clatter and the chatter, and picture Rhoda striding in and out, and Mrs. Binnie pattering round on her small feet. Business as usual. And those eggs to be boiled and not too decisively so at a moment when hot water and time were precious! Now and again she heard her mother's voice:

"Yes, in one minute, madam. We're terribly busy to-day. Yes, really."

Someone was rapping on a table with a spoon.

"Hot water, hot water—please."

Something laughed in Rachel, but her laughter had a tragic twinge to it. How funny it all sounded, while she lay there unable to move, and unable to help! Rhoda and her mother chasing tea-cups. And Rhoda's tight lips and fuss-confronting eyebrows! And her sister's quick temper?

She caught a whiff of it.

"Yes—I'm not deaf. I have to serve this lady and gentleman first."

Rachel lay still. She began to wish that she could close her window and draw the curtains and shut out all those tantalizing activities. She wanted to get away and dream and dream, for dreams were the only things left to her. It was like lying on Brighton beach amid a mob of vigorous children, while the spirit in you longed to lie and listen to nothing but the sound of the sea.

Her eyes rested on Bonthorn's flowers.

Old One Eye, the man in green with little silver bells.

"Christ is risen!"

What strange motley! She closed her eyes, and saw a dog lying in a man's arms, a dog with a broken back.

Sudden, inexpressible emotion wrung her. She drew up the fold of the sheet and covered her face with it. She sobbed.

IV

But when Rhoda stalked in to take the tray away Rachel had the appearance of complete calm. She was reading one of the books that had been placed in a neat row upon the window-shelf, and within easy reach of her hand. She glanced from the printed page to her sister's face, and read as much of Rhoda as it was possible for her to read. Rhoda's temperament had to be respected, especially when she was out of temper, and ready to resent indelicate questions.

As sisters they had always treated each other with an air of casualness, as though any relationship was incidental and not to be taken too seriously. Moods clashed. There had been occasional squabbles, but Rachel, being less strident and less sure of her own physical forcefulness, had chosen to be elusive.

She pointed to the tray.

"O, Rho, mater forgot the sugar. Don't let on."

Her blackbrowed sister nodded.

"Right-o."

She picked up the tray and walked with it to the door as though she had a score of such trays waiting for her, but before she could escape Rachel spoke again.

"Rho—I'm awfully sorry—I feel such a rotter."

Rhoda half-turned, and her set face softened.

"That's all right, old thing."

"But it isn't, Rho. I've been lying and listening to everything, and loathing my beastly legs. I want you to do something for me."

Rhoda's face regained some of its tenseness.

"What?"

"Bring me anything you can, there's a sport. The mending. And I could keep the books. And I don't see why I shouldn't cut bread and butter. Chuck anything you can at me, there's a dear."

Rhoda turned again to the door.

"Right you are."

She went out, closing the door gently, leaving Rachel realizing that her nightdress was rucked up and needed smoothing, but she had been quite unable to ask Rhoda to put that tray down and smooth out those cursed creases. Rhoda had looked overworked and on edge. Her temper was in creases, and needed smoothing out, and Rachel waited for her mother.

Chapter Sixteen

I

MR. OSGOOD'S face appeared at a window, and not unlike the face of some hirsute saint, with his straw hat for a halo. For the moment his presence was not suspected. He saw Bonthorn sitting on his high stool at the long deal table, his one eye applied to the eye-piece of a microscope, and Old Mischief's urge was to scoff at microscopes.

"Them brass chubes! What we knows we knows, and what we don't knows we don't want to know."

To begin with he had been prepared to scoff at Bonthorn, and to see in him one of those superior and academic gentlemen who are apt to appear loathsome in the eyes of the man with the hoe. Something that smelt of a University or a Government Inspectorship, something that got up and lectured and dispersed ignorance with the wavings of a white wand. But John Osgood's practical scepticism had wilted early and been left on the rubbish-heap of reality. He had seen Mr. Bonthorn with a spade trenching a piece of ground; he had seen him bud a rose; he had seen him using a hoe. And he had said to his old woman: "He be'ant t'fool I thought he was," for John had a conviction that no amateur ever mastered the craft of the hoe, but just scuffled the surface and poked the weeds under it instead of leaving them nicely with their roots to wind and sun.

Bonthorn looked up and saw the face. He beckoned with a finger, and old John put a hand to the latch of the blue door.

He removed his straw hat. That gesture was in itself a most singular act, like a tug at the forelock of his puckish soul. For Mr. Bonthorn's garden-room was to John a sort of temple of mystery where nothing was to be touched. No, not upon your life!

"John, if I ever find you meddling here"—and the threat had hovered—"I'll burn your straw hat."

John did not meddle. No one meddled, for this long low room with its ample window lived under that queer little cupola in the garden. In the old days it had been a sort of store-room, and Bonthorn had seized upon the solidity of its red brick and weathered tile and had converted it to more mysterious uses. Its window looked out across the nursery and over the green valley. It was a room of shelves, and white wood cabinets with nests of drawers, of bottles and glass jars and old tobacco tins, of files of paper, catalogues, books. It possessed a perfume as of dried herbs. In winter it was warmed by pipes from the greenhouse furnace.

Bonthorn straightened on his stool, and with a finger rubbed gently at the lid of his solitary eye. That one eye had to serve all purposes, and he found that too much concentration upon complex detail tried it.

"What's the trouble, John?"

"Them wi-olas, I've taken some slips."

"Custance Cream and Iseult?"

Puck nodded. But why did Mr. Bonthorn confer upon innocent plants such outlandish names? White of Egg or True Blue would have met the occasion.

"I've put they in a frame."

"And shut them up tight, John?"

Puck grinned.

"You will have your way, Mr. Bonthorn. The light is one third off, and shaded."

"All right. Come and look at this, John."

He got off the stool and made way for Old Mischief whose face assumed an expression of glum slyness as though he was expecting to be fooled. "No, no, I be'ant caught that way." He applied his eye to the eyepiece much as though he was looking down the barrel of a loaded gun, and screwed up the other lids. He breathed heavily.

"Looks like a flea with a feathery tail, sir."

Bonthorn did not laugh.

"That's only the low-power, John. Very little magnification."

"Whoi—it's a seed, sir."

"You've got it. Germinating nicely. That belongs to one of the first sets we took from 'Inland Revenue.'"

Puck looked puzzled, but he was dissembling.

"It's a delph seed."

"Quite right."

"The delph that thur blackguard missed swoppin' with his stick?"

"Right again. You've got an eye, John."

Mr. Osgood plucked at the grizzled stuff on his chin.

"Inland Revenue! That be a coorious sort o' name to give a flower."

"It is, John, isn't it. But they won't mind that in America. Dozens of little Inland Revenues will be going to America."

"But what made you call he——?"

Bonthorn was examining some seed-vessels laid out to dry in a glass dish.

"Rather subtle, John. Because that was the one treasure the Inland Revenue has left us. I must have my joke."

Old Osgood grunted, and being wholly mystified, he retreated upon the realities. Mr. Bonthorn was sometimes a very fantastical gentleman, but he did know what he was talking about. Not like that Labour candidate who had come down as a forlorn hope to attack the entrenched Tories of Lignor. Yes, Mr. Mascrop of Folly Farm told the tale. He had shown the fellow a field of young wheat, and the Labour Prophet, who had been bred somewhere near Bethnal Green, had remarked with vote-persuading enthusiasm: "You do grow nice grass down 'ere."

Mr. Osgood resumed his hat.

"'Bout them frames, will you be waterin' they? Sun's on 'em just now."

"Yes, I'll water them, John."

And John did not want to say: "Now don't 'ee soak 'em too much, or they'll miff," but even Puck could not utter such blattancies to Mr. Bonthorn, for unlike the Labour Prophet, Mr. Bonthorn did not ride upon an ass.

For a tired eye green distances suffice, woodland and meadow that have not to be looked at too closely, the spaces of the sky instead of a mosaic of cells. Yet, even some disability teaches a man philosophy, when to hold fast, when to relax. "Stop looking. Stop thinking. Be." Bonthorn said such things to himself, for

unless such things are said life may become mere pedantry, a fatal fanaticism. Perhaps he played with the dog.

"Mind my trousers, young fellah."

For Rollo could not resist the flap of a turned-up trouser leg, even when the provocation was provided by his master.

Bonthorn went out and cut flowers, crimson and rose cosmos, asters, a few glowing marigolds for contrast. He tied up the bunch and left it with its stalks in a watering-can in a shady corner by the tool-shed. He had his tea, with the dog and the cat for company.

Martha, coming in for the tray, had something on her mind, and Martha's mind had to speak itself. She believed in divine candour.

"About—your shirts, sir."

"Shirts, Martha?"

"Most of them—are past praying for, sir."

Bonthorn was tickling the dog's chest.

"How human of them, Martha. Someone wrote a book about it being never too late to mend."

"I've been mending them for the last——"

"I know you have. Next time I'm in Lignor I'll buy a new supply."

Martha's virtue lay in being taken seriously. Put a quip upon her and she jibbed, but a sack of seriousness shaped itself to her shoulders.

"You ought to have some flannel ones for winter, sir."

"I thought I had some, Martha. O, they're past praying for too, are they? Send 'em to heaven."

She reproved him.

"I'll make dusters of them."

With Mr. Osgood she agreed that Mr. Bonthorn was often a very fantastical gentleman. You might have thought him frivolous minded if his other-mindedness hadn't been so obvious and dependable.

II

But he possessed all the possibilities of his shyness, the aloofness of the sensitive, a quick sense of the ridiculous. Always he could turn into some byway to avoid the crowd and the crowd's con-

versation, the flowing of the futile and the obvious. Also, he had had his moments of rash diffidence, for a man's most reckless moments may be when his self is run away with by his own protesting timidity.

Sunset, and Mrs. Robinia at the eternal task of collecting tea-cloths. From within a faint and distant sound of washing up. Piles of crockery.

It would appear that Mrs. Binnie flagged him with a table-cloth, but the signal had no such significance. She was shaking off the crumbs, for the sparrows would deal with the crumbs from the Mill House tables.

The most obvious thing about Mr. Bonthorn was his bunch of flowers, perhaps because he and his bunch of flowers had become mutually self-conscious. He was in a sudden hurry to rid himself of them by presenting them to Mrs. Binnie.

"Really, Mr. Bonthorn—now that—is kind of you."

She made no attempt to handle the posy.

"Rachel will just love them, she will—really."

Her very naturalness dealt with Bonthorn's diffidence. The occasion was upon him before he could question it. Mrs. Binnie was making straight for a particular window, and with all the innocence of an impulse.

"Rachel—Mr. Bonthorn's brought you some more flowers."

Both the window and Mrs. Binnie expected him to approach and make his presentation, and not to delegate it to some convenient go-between. He found himself walking to the window, and as he reached it Mrs. Binnie fluttered off.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Bonthorn, won't you? But we've been so busy."

At that window his little, hesitant self was lost in other realities. He stood looking in. He saw her two hands resting on the coverlet, her cherry-coloured bed-jacket, the darkness of her hair. It looked very dark against the pillow, and her eyes had an equal darkness. She lay so still.

He placed the flowers on the window-shelf with the stalks towards her.

"I thought you might like them."

She seemed to lie like a figure in white wax, or one of those legendary maidens under a spell, enclosed in a case of crystal.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Bonthorn."

He had meant to leave the flowers and go, for what could you say to youth with a broken back? "Hard luck! I'm so sorry." The futility of words! She put out a hand to touch the flowers, and his impulse was instant and unhesitating. As her hand came to rest on the flower-stalks, his right hand went out and covered it.

"I wish I could do something. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to touch you."

For in her eyes he had seen a kind of fear, a shrinking. Her face seemed to grow more white; it had the soft pallor of white petals. Her hand withdrew itself.

She looked at him mutely. Her eyelids flickered. He stood with one hand holding his hat, the other resting on the window-sill. Never had he felt so inarticulate, so baffled, so disturbed.

"That's all right. I didn't mean to bother you."

Her eyes looked immense. They still suggested to him vague fear. And he was shocked, somehow ashamed of that sudden, blundering gesture. He should have understood—— But why fear—if it was fear?

"I'll leave them there, shall I? All right. I'll go and have a few words with your mother."

He managed to smile at her, but she did not smile in return.

"Thank you—so much, Mr. Bonthorn."

He nodded and moved away, and she reached out again for the flowers and held them to her face. Then, suddenly she placed them on the bed, and with a little thrust of the hand pushed them away. Her eyes closed. She seemed to shiver.

It wasn't fair. Life could come to her window and distress her, and she could not say it nay. She could only lie there and feel strangely afraid, and shrink from it, and utter a few foolish words. She was like a doll in a shop window.

She opened her eyes again and looked at the flowers.

Why couldn't he have left them with her mother?

III

Bonthorn walked back slowly up the lane, but instead of passing in by the white gate in the holly hedge he went and leaned

upon that other gate. The sun was level with the high woods, and as it sank the shadow of the woods was drawn towards him over the narrow meadow. He saw the sun as a splash of gold amid the trees. The shadow climbed, and rising like water, spread across his face. The grass seemed to grow more intensely green.

Beauty! The indescribable beauty of such a sunset, the swift interchanges, the transformations of light and of shadow! And turning about he could see the upper windows of the Mill House reflecting the light and flashing it back to him as though the upper part of the house was on fire.

He could say to himself that consciousness is a gallery of subtle impressions gathered together during the years, the complex of a man's reactions, Dutch genre or English landscape, the tender paganism of a Botticelli, a mingling of the mystical and the sensual as in Rossetti. It was strange that inward eyes should see the world so differently, or desire to see it as half a salmon and a bunch of grapes, or as Mona Lisa. Or a mere casual eye set upon the turgid stalk of sex.

O, yes, sex, was there anything he did not know about the storms of sex, or how sex can be sublimated if a man has the will for it? He remembered how Gallipoli had taught him that, months without the sight of a woman, until he had realized that sex slept in him. He had been astonished, for with some men the provocation had been like a vivid dream, desire denied, balked, a burning obsession. He could remember discussing the elemental thing with a Scottish padre in a cliff dug-out.

"Padre—a year ago I did not believe that there was anything in the monastic idea. Out here I've found that one can forget woman and be chaste."

The padre had been a little shy of the subject.

"Always on guard—my dear chap."

And Bonthorn had smiled at him.

"No, not quite like that. It's as though one had gone back to the days before sex was—I mean—to one's kid days. An utter absence of provocation. But that—of course—is not normal."

But during these years after the war the celibate in him had endured. In his younger days he would have said: "There is no such thing as continence. Purity—humbug," and yet—in

living his life among his flowers he had not known woman. There was in him a fastidiousness, a pride that had made him fierce in transcending the animal in himself; a horror of abuse, of little surreptitious secrecies. "Clean" to him was like the blade of a sword. Moreover, the mystic in him, seeking beauty everywhere, and labouring for it day by day, had learned to walk in a world of habit and to turn eyes upon gentle, sexless things. Even though his craft played with the sex of flowers, he was conscious of that which may be behind that which is.

A flower with a broken stem!

For that was how he had seen her, both as woman and child, beauty, unexpected beauty, spiritualized, strange. Never before had he realized beauty in woman as he had realized it at her window. Something wounded and afraid. But afraid of what? Of life, of herself, of a crowd of physical disharmonies, starvations, repressions? Of man, sex, provocation? That lithe, long-limbed thing lying helpless.

He had been very deeply moved. Something had happened in this world to make this sunset different from other sunsets. The eternal sentimentalist! He could overhear the gibe and smile it off.

For what would the realist say to him? "You have seen a buxom young woman in bed. Hair, arms, throat, and other attractivenesses that can be inferred. A pair of paralyzed legs. Probably you discovered a sentimental provocation in the helpless plasticity of those members. O, you mystical people. You fix your eyes on the flame and ignore the candle."

Exactly. But is not the candle's destiny its flame? And what of that crude, swashbuckling maleness that can see woman as a mere torso and legs? "Legs, my dear chap, legs!" And the body of beauty as a mere turgid white turnip!

Almost, he laughed. With his hat in his hand he wandered again down the lane as though to meet the dusk and the imminence of some new mystery. The White Flower, Amaryllis, Woman with her Crown of Thorns? For why should that crown of thorns be sacred to man alone?

He stood by the darkening hedge, and looking across the little pool, saw the youth of her leaping. That was in the past. And in the future, what?

He uttered her name softly—"Rachel."

For he did not think of her as a little, modern wench, a sort of amateur servant or waitress, a tea-shop girl. He thought of her as woman, something essentially different from himself, a creature as capable of transcending self as the mystic transcends the realist. He saw her as beauty, within and without, not evolution, but part of that mystical stuff that has no name. Not protoplasm. Not as something that can be expressed in words, a jellified abstraction, but as something that could be loved, tenderly, splendidly, with understanding.

Chapter Seventeen

I

THE days of the year may be like a succession of beads on a string, and when Rachel had fingered seven of them she knew that they were as like as peas.

She woke early, and if the sun was shining it lit up her blind, and if a wind was blowing she heard the rustling of the chestnut leaves. Or perhaps the blind flapped and fidgeted, and the soul of her fidgeted like that blind. She heard the clock at Stella Lacey striking the quarters and the hours, and like a restless child she wanted the house to wake up and play with her, even while she knew that the day would have a dreadful sameness.

She could just distinguish the alarum of her mother's clock as a little, distant buzzing, and five minutes later, Mrs. Binnie, having put a match to the oil stove in the kitchen, would come quickly in.

"Well, my darling, how have you slept?"

"O, quite well, mumsie."

Question and answer seemed to repeat themselves unchangeably.

"Not feeling sore anywhere?"

"Just a little uncomfortable. It's the clothes, I expect."

"I'll see to that in a minute. Wait till I've made your early tea."

Then would follow those intimate ministrations, Mrs. Binnie's hands busy as with a baby.

"That's better, Rachie, isn't it?"

"Yes, much better."

"I don't know what Dr. Carver would say if I let you get sore."

Then Mrs. Binnie would pull up the blind, and with the sudden brightening of the room Rachel would make her effort and show to her mother a cheerful face.

"I'm all right now, dear. Yes, I'd like the curtains back a little. It's quite a lovely day."

For she wished to help, and how could she help but by showing a bright face and by trying to match her mother's courage? The work of the day had to go on; the world upon wheels had to be served in order that the little Buck world might live. She listened to its activities while she lay abed, unable to fetch for herself the simplest thing that she needed. She was utterly dependent upon those other hands, upon the goodwill and the compassion of two other women, and being sensitive she felt ashamed, though her tragedy was so innocent.

She would say to herself: "I ought to have thought—I ought to have thought. Just recklessness. Poor Geoff did not think. I've just squandered everything, and the others have to pay."

Outwardly she was calm. Carver could describe her as an admirable patient, but her patience was willed. She built it up each day like a house of cards, knowing how fragile it was, and that some breath of emotion would bring it down. There were moments when she wanted to weep, and she did not weep. There were other moments when panic possessed her, and her impulse was to scream, and she was silent.

"I am to be like this for ever and ever. They will have to go on doing things for me. How can I bear it? How can they?"

Fearfully, she craved to do things, to help in some trivial way, to feel that she was not the dreadful incubus of her black moments. She knew that she could help herself by helping them, that even the urge to help was comforting and somehow good.

"Give me things to do."

They humoured her. Even the forceful Rhoda turned aside to bring distractions to her sister's bed, and to meet that grateful, propitiatory glance. For Rachel was humble, often pathetically so. She showed no petulance and despair in those early days.

"Here are some stockings, Rache."

"Thanks so much. That's splendid."

Her face lit up when work was brought her, things to mend, things to clean. That good lad Fred had fitted up for her a sort of trolley-table on wheels which she could push and pull with a crooked stick. On it she kept her working gear, needles and

thread and wool, metal polish, brushes, rags, a sharp old table-knife, scissors. She stitched and mended; she polished spoons and forks, and cleaned knives. She managed to cut bread and butter, dish after dish for the world upon wheels. Each evening her mother brought the day's takings to her, and she totted it up, and entered it in a ledger.

People were kind to her, people whom she would not have expected to be kind.

"My dear, here's Mrs. Gurney waiting to see you."

"Do you think I ought to, mother? I don't know whether I can live up to that."

"My dear, she's as natural as milk."

Rachel saw her, and any formalism that she had feared soon ceased from troubling her. Mrs. Gloriana had brought with her a dozen copies of *Punch*, and one or two carefully-chosen books, books that were to amuse and not to improve. If Rachel had imagined Mrs. Gurney as a sort of superior district visitor she was able to correct the crudeness of that conception.

"I expect you get rather tired of reading, but I thought you might like these."

"It's so good of you to trouble."

"My dear, do you think it's a trouble? Your mother tells me you are being so plucky about things."

Rachel smiled faintly at those wise, sad eyes.

"I'm afraid I'm not half so plucky—as I should like to be."

"Is one ever?"

She had the lightest and gentlest of touches, a hint that life could be laughed over even in the darkest of cupboards. And it was she who suggested to Rachel that she might amuse herself with a pencil and brushes. She could watch life from her window, and make a sketchbook of it, even caricature—though kindly—the new world.

"Why not try? I'm not suggesting it as a prig. When I had my own great trouble I took to scribbling."

It was an idea, and Rachel dallied with it, confessing that there had been a period in her life when she had produced home-made Christmas cards, and whimsical sketches of domestic profiles.

"I used to think them rather funny."

"Well, I would resume being funny. If you will allow me I will present you with some of the paraphernalia."

Rachel blushed.

"I don't know why you should. But—I'm——"

"That's splendid. You might even persuade the world to sit for you at your window."

When she rose to go she bent over Rachel and kissed her forehead.

"I know how things must hurt, my dear. I've been hurt. Thank you for seeing me."

Youth—too—came to Rachel's window, kindly, a little impulsively, not meaning to tantalize but to sympathize and to amuse. Quite a number of lads who had danced with her and flirted with her must have said to themselves: "Poor old Rachel, must go and cheer her up," but appearing before her window they had found themselves inarticulate. This was a different Rachel; and youth, having no experience of such a martyrdom, did not know what to say to her. Hard luck—a bad business. And becoming conscious of the inadequacy of its silence youth would sometimes grow garrulous and noisy, as though Rachel was an infant to be amused by the beating of a tea-tray. She made these young men feel uncomfortable.

Moreover, she knew it. Lying there in bed and unable to spend herself in action, she was like an overstrung wire, picking up every vibration. She became much more sensitive to things and to people, more sudden and subtle in her impressions, and too quick in detecting the artificial note or gesture.

"Hallo, Rache. Got to be up and dancing by Christmas, you know."

Some of them said the most crassly cruel things to her, and did not suspect it.

"Good old rest-cure, what!"

She watched the facile brightness of their faces die away under the cloud of a vague discomfort. This sympathetic stunt was not exactly a success, and if you couldn't play a game with a girl, or rag her or go tearing off together into space, what the devil were you to do? Youth fumbled, fidgeted, faded away and did not reappear.

She realized the finality of these disappearances. Youth—

somehow—was afraid of her. It could not be itself outside her window, and posed and chattered and forced itself to be blatantly cheerful. She was a kind of spectre lying beside the road, or some machine that had crashed and been burnt out, a sinister and unjoyous warning to others. Or was it that she herself had lost the quality of youthfulness, and had become suddenly sundered from her own generation, subtly and strangely alien to it? She was—no longer—a bright young thing. Even the quality of her glance had changed. Almost, it was the Cassandra look, instinct with an uncanny feyness, baffling the easy cheerio world.

II

She had a feeling that most of the people who came to her window were not real. Or—rather—they were actors. For, insensibly, her appreciation of reality was changing. She lay and gazed and wondered and grieved. Her glance went beyond and below those flat and shallow activities which by reason of much noise and movement assumed a specious significance. She found herself looking beyond the road towards those other distances, the shadows of clouds and of trees upon grass, the flight of birds, the moods of the sky, the play of light and of wind upon the river. Slowly, and perhaps almost unconsciously, she began to apprehend these aspects of nature as reality, like a young child responding to its environment.

The road—with its seeming variousness—began to have for her a dreadful sameness. An endless string of mechanical toys seemed to be drawn along it by some ironical colossus, toy machines full of little people who were all alike. She had not realized how much alike they were until she lay and listened to their voices and to what they said. The same jokes, the same facetiousness, the same grumblings, the same absorption in trivialities. They were almost as alike as their cars; some were a little larger, a little noisier, a little more pretentious than others.

“The old bus.”

Everybody seemed to refer to a car as a bus. It was some bus, or a nice little bus, or the old bus, or Bert’s bus.

She lay and wondered why she saw the crowd and the road so differently.

There were other revelations.

One wet day someone started the gramophone. She heard tables and chairs pushed back, and voices and laughter.

"Put on 'Blue Eyes,' Rho."

For a moment the music devastated her. They were dancing, and the rhythm tantalized her imagined feet. And she would never dance again! She caught the sheet between her teeth and bit it.

She heard her mother's voice.

"Really—do stop that gramophone. Poor Rachel——"

There was a hush, a suggestion of protest, and suddenly she found herself. She raised her voice.

"Mother—I don't mind. Don't let them stop."

Mrs. Binnie's quick ears heard her. The small face appeared in the doorway.

"It will worry you, won't it, dear?"

"Not a bit. I'd like to listen."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

The dancing went on. It both tantalized her and solaced her. The body of Rachel yearned, while the spirit of her seemed to finger those physical self-expressions and to appraise them. She could say to herself: "I have to get used to certain things. Perhaps they will not matter to me so much if I get used to them. Like the cars on the road. In seeing so many—you see none."

She felt tranquilized.

They were playing "The Show Boat."

A nasal, feminine voice declaimed: "Why do I love you?—Why do you love me?"

Yes, why, and with a voice like that?

And then she became aware of something opaque shadowing a part of her window. Mr. Nicholas Bonthorn. He had been there fully half a minute before she realized his presence, looking down at her, his hat in one hand, a bunch of flowers in the other. A certain aspect of her provoked in him a simile. Snowy Mespilus. Queer, fragrant, white old words. She glanced up and surprised his brown face in a kind of rapt gazing.

She smiled. She was not afraid of him to-day. To-morrow she might be.

III

He laid the flowers on the window-ledge. His face had a strange, whimsical shyness.

"Music."

She looked at his flowers.

"If you like to call it that."

The whimsical gleam passed. He—too—had come by the sudden impression that she was different, Snowy Mespillus and not a little hard white bud. Something deep and rich stirred in him. He became aware of a little tentative movement of her left hand, and some intuitive gesture answered it. He picked up the flowers and passed them to her, and their fingers touched.

"They're lovely. It's very good of you."

She laid them on the bed.

"I mustn't get spoilt, Mr. Bonthorn. Some people are too good to me."

He fetched a chair and placing it outside the window, sat astride of it, with his arms crossed on the back.

"Do you mind?"

No, she did not mind. She was not afraid of him to-day, though why her mood was different she could not say. Moreover, he was not like the casual people who came and went, or those young things who were restlessly bright. He had reality, a sort of repose, and almost she could have described him as being part of the landscape, one with the trees and the river.

And he was wondering about her. What did she do and think during the long day? How was she adapting the altered rhythm of her youth to this monotony, and if she was like a bird in a cage hung in a window would she ever have the heart to sing? And what songs would she sing? A lament for her lost freedom?

But while he wondered he talked to her about simple things, his dog and his cat and their tricks and whims and jealousies. He told her one or two funny stories about Old Mischief, and she laughed, for the words he used, and the things he said did not matter supremely to either of them. They were like leaves or petals floating on some undercurrent and carried along by it.

He asked her about the books she read, and the traffic that passed on the road.

"Does it bother you?"

"Sometimes. But I'm used to it. We live by it—you know."

"And you hear plenty of conversation."

"O, plenty."

In fact, nothing very singular or intimate was said by either of them. They were like two people playing at cards, putting down pieces of pasteboard, while their eyes exchanged occasional glances, and inward questions were asked and left unanswered.

Chapter Eighteen

I

A BAD day.

They had not been able to find her anything to do.

It rained, and there was a wind, one of those stark winds that turn the world inside out and display its drab, grey, shabby lining. The trees were troubled, the sky a moving smudge. The chestnut outside her window, smitten by sudden gusts, seemed to throw up dismayed and tragic hands. A litter of leaves lay on the stones.

She had to have her window shut. The rain pattered against it, and she watched the drops coalesce and run. A green leaf blew against one of the panes and stuck.

O, weariness! O—ruffled, restless trees! She could see a little figure in a yellow oilskin, motionless, squatting on a stool by the river. The man was fishing, in spite of the rain and in spite of the wind. He had been there since ten o'clock. She did not see him catch anything, though now and again he drew in his line and did something to it, and once more the rod slanted out over the water. Absurd little figure!

Her book bored her. She let it lie on the bed, and as though to annoy her it procured from somewhere power of movement, slid and fell to the floor. And now that it was on the floor and beyond her reach she wanted it.

What a child one was, but what a hopeless child!

She lay and looked at the grey sky and the smudged landscape. She grieved. It was suggested to her that all her life was going to be like this, wasted days, time dragging itself along with a broken back. And this was summer. What of her life when winter came and the sun shone once a week, and the night began at halfpast four?

She shuddered a little and was afraid.

Suddenly she heard a crash, voices. Yes, something had gone

down on the floor in the tea-room, and Rhoda was in a temper.

"O, damn—what did you put it there for?"

"My dear, really!"

"Half off the table too. Bang go six cups and plates. How bloody silly!"

Yes, Rhoda could be tempestuous. She had been more short-tempered of late, blacker about the eyebrows, full of frowns. Her mouth looked tight as though the lips shut things in. She strode in and out, always hurrying, too starkly occupied to speak.

"O, I'm fed up."

Someone was bending down and picking up the pieces, and making a clatter with them on a metal tray.

"Yes, it's always you young things who get fed up, and throw your cards down. I can't throw mine down. If I get fed to the teeth, my dear——"

Rhoda flared.

"That's right. Youth always rotten and irresponsible and selfish. Fact is, you old people forget——"

Mrs. Binnie's voice became plaintive and protesting: "I'm not so very old, not so old as all that."

There was more clanking of broken china, and apparently Rhoda was back in the saddle, and in control of her kicking temper.

"Sorry, mater. I go off the deep end sometimes. All my fault."

"That's all right, my dear."

Rachel lay and listened. She knew that she was listening more and more attentively to those two voices, and also—that she was watching the faces of her sister and her mother, yes—and with a kind of fearfulness. What if those two faces clouded over? What, if the burden of her own helplessness became too grievous to be borne with any air of sweetness and patience? She could endure so long as those two endured, but already it seemed to her that Rhoda's patience was wearing thin. Lying in bed there she sensed things so much more subtly than of old. Supposing—because of her—the spirit of the place turned sour, and life became a thing of sordid squabbings, of overwork and worry and squalid self-repressions, of thin-edged smiles and forced compassion? Supposing they grew to hate her?

Three women nagging each other, and uttering, during moments of provocation—bitter or unforgettable words.

"A lot of use you are!"

"Well—I can't help it."

"You might try and look cheerful, anyway. All the dirty work falls on us."

Would it come to so grievous a state, a kind of simmering stew of discord and disillusionment and cynicism?

The door opened and Mrs. Binnie came into the room. She closed the door, and noticing the book lying on the floor, stooped to pick it up.

"Did it fall off, Rachie?"

"Yes, it fell off."

"You ought to have called me."

Rachel felt smothered. She could not say: "I did not want to trouble you. I give you so much trouble as it is," for her mother's small face was looking pinched and worried and none too sure of its self-control. Mrs. Binnie sat down on a chair beside the bed, and made aimless movements with her hands, as though smoothing out the creases in an imaginary apron. She looked pathetic. Her eyes had the drabness of the wet sky.

"Rhoda's a bit upset. It's natural—I suppose. She was going out with Fred this evening, and he can't take her."

One of Rachel's hands rested on the recovered book.

"Fred too busy?"

"I suppose so. And then we had a smash. I do wish Rho wasn't so quick tempered. It gives me palpitations."

Rachel put out a hand.

"Poor mumsie, we are a worry to you."

"O, no, my dear, Rho doesn't mean it, not really. She can't stand having things upset. She expects to boss things and have them go just so—but they don't—my dear. If I've learnt one thing—I've learnt that."

"Just—the cussedness, mumsie."

"One has to make allowances, Rachie. Bound to be upsets, bound to be smashes. No use getting wild about it. So tiring."

They held hands, and Rachel knew that there were many things that she wished to say to her mother; tender, intimate, reassuring things, and yet she could not say them. She felt so

dreadfully dumb. But—why? To lie there feeling inarticulate in the presence of the one creature whose compassion was disinterested seemed so strange, and yet it was reality. She wanted to pour herself out, to talk and talk, and yet she could do no more than hold her mother's hand. She was too conscious of her tragedy; it seemed too near to her, just as Mrs. Binnie seemed too near.

"I wish I could say things, mumsie."

She felt a pressure of the fingers.

"O—I know what you mean, Rachie."

But that was just the misery of it, she did not know. And how could you break into lamentation, and pour the shame of your soul into that patient, uncomplaining lap? "O—I wish I could die. It would be so much easier for everybody." This terrible muteness in the presence of the one creature who loved her. Was it always so? Was it to strangers that you talked, while your lips were sealed to the one real friend? How ironical! How utterly alone one was, a slip of quivering consciousness stretched out on a bed.

She pressed her mother's hand.

"You have always been wonderful to us."

Mrs. Binnie allowed one sob to escape her.

"You are all I've got, Rachie, you two. I have tried—I have—really. And it's worth while—if you——"

"O, mumsie, don't. I'm so utterly useless."

"Don't say that, my dear."

"No, I won't."

II

How utterly alone she was. Those cars hurrying by along the wet road emphasized her loneliness. She was like some green thing that had been trodden down by a passing foot, and left to wilt while life went by.

If only she had someone to talk to, someone who understood and who would not be hurt by her confessions, someone to whom she could say: "I have to be silent when I yearn to cry out. I'm weak and selfish and frightened, and I must not show it. I might be so dreadfully naked—if I once let go. There are all sorts of things I want—and can't have. I—want—yes—all the things

that a live—warm body wants, and I have to be a shadow, to pretend. I want kisses. I want to be touched and held. I want to dance and run and laugh, and be mischievous. I want to be looked at by a man—and to look. I want to put on pretty clothes. O, there's so much and so much. Half of me lusts to live—while the other half is dead."

Sometimes she wished that she could howl like a dog. And that reminded her of childish days when Mrs. Buck's house had been opposite the cemetery gates at Lignor, and ladies, coming to visit the graves of their dear departed, had brought their dear dogs with them. But since dogs had not been allowed in the cemetery, the ladies had tied their dogs to the railings and the doleful beasts had kept up a melancholy howling.

What egotists people were! "Poor Carlo shall have a walk." And Carlo was tied to the railings and hated it, and when his mistress reappeared he was overjoyed at being set free. And his mistress thought: "How devoted dear Carlo is to me."

Egotism! It was not the dog's happiness that mattered, but the woman's. The dog's emotion flattered her. She—was the goddess, the dispenser of favours. Rachel could remember a neighbour complaining about the howling of those dogs, an irritable neighbour who gave music lessons; he had written a letter to the *Lignor Argus* upon this nuisance.

"Idle Ladies and their Dogs."

One of the idle ladies had replied to him. She had accused the protestor of blatant selfishness. Dogs must have exercise, dear things. Her dog—never—howled. And even if he did howl for his dear mistress—sniff—sniff—who was visiting the grave of her poor dear husband—well—wasn't such feeling touching and natural. Her dog should howl—for ever and ever—if he pleased.

Egotists!

Yes, she supposed that—in a sense—she was just such an egotist, part dog, part mistress, but the dogs tied to the railings had howled, and she could not. Moreover, the dogs had been set free, while for her the leash and the railings were final.

But if only she could talk to someone, empty herself of these dark self-absorptions, and somehow escape from her own self-hauntings! To have to endure and in silence! If only she could

behave like a child, and run with her grievings to someone who would not be too disturbed!

But to whom could she talk?

To Bonthorn?

Yes, perhaps. The man who had held that dying dog in his arms. But Bonthorn had not been to her window for three days and she had begun to wonder about him. Was he like those others who came and handed her a little kindness, and then went away upon his own affairs, and forgot? Why should he be different from those others? What was her tragedy to him? No more perhaps than an unhappy incident to be deplored for a day or a week, and then left to mend itself. You could not lay your burden upon other shoulders. It was part of your flesh, part of your intimate self, inexorably sundered from all other selves.

Towards evening the sky cleared and the rain ceased, and though Rachel could not see the sunset she saw the valley lit up by it. A sudden wind blew and the wet trees trembled; they seemed to scatter golden light, and as suddenly the wind ceased: the world was still. So still was it that it had for her the appearance of beautiful unreality, of a faery landscape suddenly evolved out of crystal. She watched the light die away as the sun went down behind the hills. The twilight was tinged with green, and gradually it grew grey, and in a strip of blue-black sky a star quivered.

It occurred to her that beauty could be more wounding than ugliness, for beauty provoked in you strange discontents and yearnings, while ugliness was man's domestic architecture, so homely and obvious that it did not tantalize you.

But in the beautiful, dripping dusk she thought of Bonthorn. If he came to her window to-night she felt that she would be able to talk to him.

III

It grew dark, and Mrs. Binnie hurried in.

"Rachie—you'd like a light?"

"Don't bother. I'm quite happy here—in the dark."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. But I would like the window open."

"You won't feel cold?"

"No."

Mrs. Binnie raised the lower sash.

"I'll be in again presently, Rachie. Rho has a headache, and I've sent her to bed."

She lay in the darkness, watching the stars come out and ever and again the foliage of the chestnut tree was lit by the headlights of a passing car. The wet frostiness of the night was pleasant to her. It was growing late, and yet she had a feeling that he would come and stand at her window, even though it was unlit; and in the darkness she would talk to him.

She waited and listened. The leaves of the chestnut dripped and dripped. A car passed, and in passing seemed to leave behind it some other sound. She heard a table creak as though someone had pushed against it. She was aware of a presence, a faint crepitation as of a sleeve rubbing against the wall. She held her breath and listened.

Yes, someone was there just outside the window, but hidden from her as yet. She fancied that she could hear the sound of breathing.

A voice startled her.

"Hallo, Rache."

The upper part of her went rigid. Her head lay turned on the pillow, and she saw the dim outline of a head and body at the window, a kind of dark bulk.

"Who's that?"

"Guess."

She was silent.

"You ought to know without guessing. Well—how's life? Finding things a bit dull?"

She lay and stared. She was frightened, for it seemed to her that a large animal was rubbing itself against the wall, tail and hair erect, and that its movements had a lascivious slyness. Almost, the creature purred, and gloated, and sleeked itself.

"It's Stanley—Stanley Shelp."

She felt a kind of horror of him and of herself, because—in the darkness—he seemed to suggest some of those cravings that vexed her. He was life at her window, solicitous, suggestive, sex symbolized in its hot breathing and surreptitious eagerness. She wanted to cry out.

He leaned in.

"Damned bad luck—Rache. Sorry. Thought you might like a little gossip on the quiet."

And suddenly she understood. She divined his impulse. Her very helplessness piqued him, the inert shape of her in bed. Yes, probably she would be less pixsome now, less wayward. She might even welcome sex, the insidious smell of the male thing, sensual tenderness, pawings, provocations. She lay rigid.

"What did you come here for?"

"Feeling friendly, my dear. Nice dark night. Give a chap a hand."

She could distinguish a groping arm. She had a sudden feeling that if she humoured him—even for a moment—he would slip in through the window. She would have him on her bed.

She cried out.

"Go away."

She called to those others.

"Mother—Rhoda—I want you."

The bulk of him hung there for a moment. He sneered at her.

"All right, all right! Don't howl. I suppose if some other fellow came——"

"Go away."

He disappeared, and there was no sound but the dripping of the chestnut leaves. No one had heard her. No one came.

IV

She felt distracted, even while lying so very still in the summer darkness. She was not ashamed of being woman, but she was ashamed of the provocation, and that she should have been provoked by him, not as a man but as her opposite. She was no stranger to sex. Like her generation she was less concerned with an act's niceness than with its naturalness.

But, that she should be so much alive in the midst of this living death—that was what shocked her, not that it was shocking, but because it was unattainable, a kind of mockery. His coming to her window had been gross mockery. As man she loathed him, but he had made her realize that there were other

men; he had provoked the suggestion, and made her young blood yearn.

Not for him, but for a lover, the spark to the tinder of her youth, those ultimate tendernesses.

She pulled the sheet up over her face.

But—how impossible! To be conscious of that fierce, sweet, elemental urge, in her blood and in her brain; to be tantalized by it, humiliated by it. An hour ago she had felt tranquilized and calm, content with the idea of talking to a man, and then the young flesh of her had been set alight. Not sex in its mere crudity, but in its beauty, in its surrenders and in all its secret, spiritual sublimations. She wanted to be loved, the whole of her, eyes, lips, body—self, the creature that was Rachel, the spirit that was Rachel.

And then she heard that other voice, and her despair cried out in her:

“O, go away—please—I’m—I’m not myself.”

He did not utter a word in reply, and she lay with eyes closed, arms straight and rigid. She divined the placing of something on her window-sill. He was gone, and she opened her eyes, and saw a dim, white blur—flowers.

She reached out and took them, and dragging them under the sheet, laid them against her bosom.

She thought: “I’m in my coffin. Flowers. I wonder if any woman has ever come to life in the darkness underground, and cried out and gone mad. I mustn’t go mad. Oh, if I could talk to somebody.”

Chapter Nineteen

I

OLD MISCHIEF, having seen on several occasions a bunch of flowers waiting with their stems in a watering-can, gave way to a very natural curiosity, and made it his affair to discover whither those flowers went. For Mr. Bonthorn was not the kind of man to whom you put the obvious question. Moreover, Old Mischief could enjoy a certain circuitous slyness. If there was pleasure to be got from peeping, let the peeping preserve its puckishness.

Solemnly wearing his gent's boater, and telling Mrs. Osgood that he was going to see Tom Tranter's onions—any excuse being good enough for Mrs. Osgood—he sat under a particular hedge and smoked his pipe. There was a hollow place in the hedge where an old thorn tree grew, a kind of green choir-stall or sentry-box, and from it Old Mischief could command a hundred yards of the Lignor road and the front of the Mill House. He saw Mr. Nicholas Bonthorn come over the bridge, and disappear into the Mill House.

So—that was it! John Osgood had wondered whether those flowers went to Stella Lacey. Carrying coals to Newcastle, or a bouquet to a woman with white hair! But having done his peeping, Mr. Osgood could not keep the secret to himself. He had to try it on Martha, just as he had tried the professor's pills upon a valetudinarian wife.

"So, Mr. Bonthorn's taking flowers to the ladies."

He supplied this information to Martha at the back door while he was cleaning Mr. Bonthorn's boots.

Martha was filling a kettle as though the kettle had committed some offence.

"What's your nonsense now?"

Puck tittered.

"Takin' flowers to the Mill House, regular. And who would they be for? Mrs. Skinny Buck?"

"It's none of my business—or yours."

"O, don't tell me you be'ant coorious. He takes them flowers to one of the young women. The one that be paralyzed, I guess. Such a kind-hearted gen'leman, hee-hee."

Curtly, Mrs. Martha told him not to be a fool. She added that Mr. Bonthorn was less of a fool than most men. Getting sentimental about one of those young Buck women, even though she had a broken back!

"You mind your business, John, and polish those boots proper."

"I'll polish they, so you can see your beautiful face in 'em, Martha."

"You're an old fool."

Had she used those words to Nicholas Bonthorn on that particular morning he might have given her some whimsical answer, while inwardly agreeing with her.

"O, yes we all of us are fools, Martha, more or less."

And for the moment he was in the mood of more so. Rebuffed, and asked to go away, he had suddenly seen himself in cap and bells, the sweet fool, the sentimental ass. A man of forty or so spending the perfume of sentiment upon a young girl—who—a few weeks ago had been flicking her long legs over pieces of string and careering behind youth—up hill and down dale—and holding tight to it. Fantastic ass! What had he to say to her or she to him?

But he was one of those incorrigibly sensitive people—who, having once gone forth upon an adventure, cannot let the grace and the spirit of it lapse. A gesture should not be cut short or turned into an awkward gesticulation. If flowers had gone to the Mill House they should continue to go there. But he eschewed the window. He walked in at the front door, and presented his bouquet to Robinia.

Mrs. Binnie was a little puzzled, but then Mr. Bonthorn was very much the gentleman. Also, she was too much worried at the moment to distinguish subtle differences in shades of behaviour. She was worried about the milk bill and the price of coal during the coming winter, and about Rhoda's temper which did not require additional fuel, but especially she was worried about Rachel. Rachel had been so queer and quiet during the last two or three days.

Mrs. Binnie talked to everybody. Had Jehovah appeared suddenly in her doorway she would have invited him to discuss the morals of the Lignor tradesmen, or the meanness of certain people who assumed that a shilling per head included all the unconsumed cakes on the dish.

"So kind of you, Mr. Bonthorn. No, we haven't much time to grow flowers, only a few hardy cut and come again what's-a-names in the back garden."

Mrs. Binnie was preoccupied and flustered. To-morrow was Saturday, and the day's baking of cakes had not been a success, perhaps because Rhoda's temper had been feeling the heat. If there was one thing Mrs. Binnie wanted to do it was to sit down, and at the moment life would not permit her to sit down.

"I'm sure Rachel would like a little chat, Mr. Bonthorn. Anything to keep her cheerful, poor dear."

Bonthorn smiled, knowing that Mrs. Robinia had not meant to catalogue him with the anythings and the etceteras.

"O—I won't bother her. Just give her those flowers."

He walked out, and Mrs. Binnie, escaping for a moment from her fog of abstraction, cocked a brown eye at his departing back. Now, what was the matter with Mr. Bonthorn? A little abrupt, and funny and shy? O, just a mood! It was astonishing how much leisure some people seemed to have for the cultivation of moods.

"Well, really! I don't even get time to think."

And she scurried towards some activity in the kitchen.

Bonthorn, picking his way among the empty tables, and looking at the chestnut tree, and not at that window under the green selvedge of it, heard his name spoken.

"Mr. Bonthorn——"

He swung round. His face had a kind of startled alertness. He diverged towards the window.

She lay there and looked at him. Almost she suggested breathlessness after effort. She had seen him pass her window and go to the door, and she had waited. His aloofness had linked itself to the rebuff she had given him in that previous dusk. "O, go away, please." And suddenly she had known acute disappointment, the chagrin of the forgotten child—and more than that.

But she looked frightened. She was frightened. For now that

he was at her window she did not know what to say to him, and all the intimate things she had dreamed of saying seemed to scatter like a flurry of dead leaves. Also, there had come to her a realization of him as man, but man so different from all the other men she had known.

But something had to be said, and while struggling in the depths of her silence and feeling herself sinking beneath its surface, she clutched at reality.

"I'm sorry—I was rude—the other night."

He looked at her with a curious, veiled intentness.

"Were you rude? After all, you have a right to your window. It isn't a box-office."

"No—but——"

"Sometimes one wants to be alone."

"Yes, sometimes."

He hesitated, and then he went for a chair, and carried it to the window.

"May I?"

She nodded.

He sat astride the chair, with his arms crossed on its back, and she lay with her face turned on the pillow, looking at him. She wanted to look at him. Almost she could have wished him unaware of her, while she looked and looked, and wondered about him at her leisure. He was real, though she did not realize as yet how terribly real he was to become to her.

He began to talk to her, and a part of her lay and listened while a part of her observed him. She began to notice all sorts of little things about him that she had not noticed previously, for she had seen him in broad effect and not in detail. What was behind that black shade, and why did he wear it? Just a socket, emptiness, or closed lids? And wasn't it rather tiring to have only one eye to see things with? She listened and looked and gave him vague answers, for just then she was more concerned with the reality of him, the mystery of him, than she was with what he said.

But suddenly he was speaking to her about real things, and her eyes seemed to open wide to them. It was as though she had been looking at him through a closed window, and he had opened the window. He seemed much nearer to her.

"When are they going to get you out of doors?"

Her eyelids flickered.

"O—I don't quite know yet."

"Don't you long to get out?"

"O, yes, terribly. But then——"

She felt that she had come nearer to him and the nearness confused her.

"They are making me a kind of long chair on wheels. Mr. Tanrock is having it made—at their garage, but Dr. Carver wants me to wait for two or three weeks."

"But then—you will be able to get out."

"Perhaps."

Why—perhaps? She had turned her head on the pillow, and he saw her in profile. She was looking up at the ceiling.

"Well—you see, everything has to be done for me. They're awfully good, those two. But to be so—helpless."

"It worries you. You feel——"

"So—ashamed—somehow."

Her hands made little movements on the coverlet, and then lay still, but it seemed to him that her stillness concealed a suppressed and almost agonized restlessness. And suddenly he seemed to see her as she was, the whole suffering, shrinking, bewildered soul of her, a live spirit lashed to a bed, grieving and yearning.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of, Rachel."

She turned her head on the pillow, eyes wide and almost accusing.

"O, don't you know? They have to——"

He answered with a slight movement of the head.

"Yes, everything. Your world is just as far as your hands can reach. And you grieve. You lie and think—how——"

Her eyes seemed to narrow. She was looking at him with a new intentness, a poignant curiosity. She did not see him merely as a face, but as a presence, a creature who somehow comprehended her realities. He understood. He was not mere man conscious of her as flesh; he was conscious of the whole of her.

"O—if one couldn't think!"

His head seemed to sink a little like the head of a man who was praying.

"But would you be—you?"

She drew her breath in sharply.

"Ah, but that's it! One's body lies here. O, how I loathe it at times—this wretched—useless shell. I can't even wash myself. O, but I mustn't talk like this."

He looked at her.

"It is just how you ought to talk——"

"But I can't—I mustn't. Don't you see——? I can't lie and grouch to mother. How can I? Hasn't she enough to put up with? One has to stifle things."

He spoke as though he meant every word to have infinite meaning for her.

"But you can talk to me."

She lay silent, gazing. She seemed to sink more deeply into the bed, as though something in her had relaxed. She had given way to a spasm of despair, and for the moment it had passed. She lay and looked at him. She loved him.

"Why do you say that?"

He smiled, and his smile puzzled her.

"Because—you can. Shall we leave it at that? Because—I think—I understand. Because—I want you to talk to me."

She closed her eyes. She heard a movement of the chair. He was going, and the soul of her consented. She wanted to be alone, quite alone, to feel and to think. Did he understand that? Was that why he was leaving her?

She opened her eyes.

"I—I—think I've talked enough to-night——"

"Yes, enough for to-night."

Her face seemed luminous.

"Good night——"

"Good night—Rachel."

II

Up at Yew End that night Bonthorn heard other voices in the lane, and one of them was like Rachel's voice, but harder and more metallic. A man and a girl were strolling, and the girl had certain things to say to him, unhappy, tempestuous things.

"Well—we've got our lives to live."

The man agreed, but with reservations. Apparently he had less sympathy with the girl's attitude than he should have had,

and it was evident that she divined his rather inarticulate resistance and resented it. She knew that she was showing to him a side of herself that was not flattering, but when your temper is on edge a man should allow you a blunt surface to work it off upon.

"All right, Rho. But after all——"

He mumbled, and Bonthorn missed some of the words, but they annoyed the girl, and her retort was sharp and clear.

"O, don't talk like that. I'm not a cinema angel. I'm just human. I don't mind hanging on for six months."

They passed the white gate and paused at that other gate, and Bonthorn, who had been walking up and down the grass with a pipe and his own thoughts, stood by the holly hedge to listen. He was eavesdropping, but what of it? For this lover's argument touched other matters. It was like a thread in a skein, and one end of the skein was in his hands.

"But what are they going to do?"

Rhoda flared.

"You've asked me that silly question three times."

"All right, old thing, but—after all—it is a bit of a problem."

"O, shut up, it isn't your problem. You don't seem to realize that I'm getting fed up. Yes, you think that rotten of me, don't you? O, yes—you do. You're so dashed impartial. You expect me to back up the mater. Well, haven't I? But what gets my goat is your assuming——"

The man's voice tried conciliation.

"Look here, old girl, what—are—we scrapping about? It seems damned silly——"

"I should think so."

"All I said was—that we couldn't very well rush things, and leave the old lady up against it—until——"

"Yes, you don't have to do the work, my lad, do you? And Rachel's smash-up has just about doubled the work. Every blessed thing has to be carried in and out. O, Fred, I know I'm talking like a beast, but I'm tired."

"I know, old thing, and then one flares up. I only want to help both sides. Hold tight, Rho."

"You're a good lad, Fred. You're much better tempered than I am."

"O, a bit—perhaps. Depends on how we're made."

A little night breeze ruffled the leaves of the big beech tree, and the two voices were stilled. Rhoda and young Tanrock were leaning against the gate with arms about each other, and Bonthorn guessed as much. He heard the voices begin again, but they sounded gentle and intimate and distant. He could catch a few detached words.

"Well, say till next midsummer."

"I don't want her to think I'm fed up with it."

"We might be able to help a bit. The business is hot stuff—these days. I get a third share in January."

The two voices moved from the field gate to the beech tree and seemed to pause in the deep shade.

"Just a minute, Rho."

"All right."

Bonthorn strolled away from the hedge, for that more intimate minute under the beech tree was theirs, and not his. He left it to them and their youth. He sat down in a chair under the cherry tree, and presently he heard the two voices passing away down the lane. They had a languor, the smoothness of a desire that was satisfied. He heard Tanrock laugh. Then there was silence, save for a faint stirring in the foliage of the beech tree.

Something cool and moist touched his hand. The little Cairn had crept to him so noiselessly that he had not heard the patter of paws over the grass. The dog put his fore-paws against Bonthorn's knees and whimpered.

"Hallo, you little thing! Up, up."

Rollo leapt into his lap, and thrust his muzzle under Bonthorn's chin.

"What will Martha say to you, my lad? Sneaking out of bed at this hour."

The dog licked him.

"Lonely little fellow, what? Yes, loneliness! The more you feel—the more you miss things. Yes, that will do, young fellow; I don't want washing all over."

He sat awhile in the darkness and then—with the dog at his heels, he went out through the white gate and down the lane. The night had settled itself for sleep, and trees had drawn down

their green hoods, and the mill pool was black velvet. He went as far as the bridge and stood leaning against the stone parapet, but hearing a car approaching, he picked up the dog and held him in his arms. Two glaring eyes rushed at them and passed, and the churned silence resettled itself like troubled water. Bonthorn, with the Cairn's head snuggling against his neck, looked at the Mill House, and at one particular window. It showed no light.

Was she asleep? Had that car wakened her? Life, with its glare and noise rushing past, leaving her to the troubled darkness, and adding to her loneliness? For now he was comprehending the loneliness of that little room into which people came and went, carrying and fetching, and yet leaving behind them nothing that could fill its emptiness for her. Mrs. Robinia, flustered, and kind and sedulous, carrying in her cup of devotion and carrying it away again untouched by the lips of a melancholy that was mute.

Yes, this was tragedy, this obscure, secret broken thing lying hidden away in a green valley. Like the agony of the war this anguish was so unsensational. People did not understand the stealth of tragedy. They expected posturings and clamour, and the flamboyant falseness of the picture-house. Life had to screech like a machine.

But she lay there abed, on the edge of the highway, and looked at the trees and the river, and at the faces of people to whom she could not tell things. Her very sensitiveness made her mute. She had moments of terror, like a child shut away in a dark cupboard.

Yes, but her terror was not the terror of a child. She was woman. She could not or would not cry out and so suffer her sorrows to be assuaged.

But she had cried out to him, and her little cry of anguish had had for him a bitter sweetness, an almost unbearable poignancy. He wanted to enfold her dear pain and to possess it, not as the mere egoist—the shiny and consciously consoling little pa-god, but as a man who could love the mystery of loving even as he loved the mystery of some strange flower or tree or sunset.

Chapter Twenty

I

IF LIFE is a mosaic composed of innumerable tesserae—the little trivial happenings of the day set in the cement of individual consciousness, its pattern may appear predestined, if there is any pattern to be recognized. These little cubes of circumstance may be variously coloured, and if the figure is that of Spring, it may carry a garland; if that of Winter a black faggot may lie across its back! But in Rachel's case the pattern laid out by a sequence of little happenings tended to be of one colour, and the face of the figure was the face of tragedy.

Her day might be a day of trivialities. A part of her was numb, a part of her ached; there might be bread-crumbs in the bed; someone left her in a draught; a book fell on the floor. Or nature was suddenly urgent and had to be helped in its urgency by other hands. Rhoda had a tense face. There were sounds of distant discord. Personalities gathered at the tables on the terrace, personalities that were as alike as rolls of linoleum in a shop; the patterning might vary, but smell and texture were identical.

She would find herself looking at her legs while her mother massaged them. They had kept their shape; they were white and comely, and save for the sensuous out-curve of the thighs, as straight as the legs of Atalanta. A few months ago she had danced, and leaped and run with them.

"You've got such pretty legs, my dear."

Mrs. Robinia made that remark almost daily, but to Rachel those white members were annoying appendages of white wax, or as useless as silk stockings stuffed with wool. She would watch her mother's hands kneading and flicking, and wonder at Mrs. Binnie's patience, and at the seeming futility of these activities. What did it matter if those two members became like a couple of sticks, and yet her mother seemed strangely concerned over conserving the comeliness of those legs.

"Mustn't let the muscles waste, you know, my dear."

But why keep those useless things alive? Why tantalize her with suggestions of liveness? Why not accept the inevitable and assume that she was like a creature cut in half, and that the upper half of her alone mattered? And did that matter?

She was so much at the mercy of circumstance.

Mrs. Binnie cut her finger badly with a kitchen knife during the rush of a Saturday afternoon, and the wound, instead of healing, became septic, and for a week or more Robinia's left hand was out of action. It had to be fomented every few hours and carried in a sling. Meanwhile, Rhoda was obliged to deputize, and act as nurse and masseuse, waitress and cook and housemaid. She would come into Rachel's room with the air of a fierce young woman confronting a sandstorm. Her face and eyes had a bleakness. She was less gentle than Mrs. Binnie.

"Now—then—legs! You've got the clothes rucked up again."

Criminal carelessness! As though everything in the Mill House had entered into a conspiracy with Rachel's bed-clothes and plotted to get rucked up.

"Sorry, Rho."

"That's better. Now—then."

She rubbed and pounded. She was rough and peremptory without being conscious of her roughness; it was just part of the day's hurry; the work had to be got through somehow.

"Why not leave it this morning?"

"Not likely. If I'm on the job I'm on it."

She did things with a frowning, dark inexorableness, a kind of tempestuous haste, and when she knocked the spirit lotion off the table she swore.

"Damn you! You would be just there, wouldn't you."

She would leave Rachel feeling that a small tornado had been active in her room. She would leave her feeling humiliated and weak and bewildered, and with the insidious and gradual conviction that Rhoda hated her, or would grow to hate her. Rhoda's temperament was not suited to sick rooms. Her young forcefulness seemed to resent wiltings and whimsies. To watch Rhoda snatch bottles and towels and other etceteras and clear them away was like watching an angry fate dealing with exasperating impedimenta.

When the door closed Rachel would lie very still, and look at the sky or the green bluffs of Stella Lacey. She was becoming more and more conscious of that relentless road. She seemed to be lying on the edge of it, within a foot or two of all those whirling wheels. Almost, she could feel the draught of it, and fancy herself being sucked in like a piece of crumpled paper, to be dealt with as one of those machines had dealt with Bonthorn's stray dog.

The barrier was so flimsy, a row of posts and chains. Yes, the barrier was so flimsy for all of them. They were at the mercy of that road; they existed by it and for it, with their one petrol pump and their poor little tables. Teas. Threepenny profits, the domestic budget like a lap into which coppers were tossed, wet days calamitous. Her mother's small face all puckered and set, confronting necessity.

What a helpless lump of flesh she was!

She began to be afraid of the road. It filled her with strange dreads. Sometimes she would shrink when some high-powered car roared by. Supposing it were to skid? Supposing some thundering lorry suddenly saw red, and charged her window like a monstrous, trampling beast? But would it matter?

She began to feel towards the road as some primitive creature might feel towards a bug-a-boo god, a power to be propitiated and dreaded. It gave you sustenance, and it gave you terror and death. Though crowded with little fragments of humanity it was so impersonal, so relentless. The very cars ceased to be vehicles at the service of society. They were like links in the iron track of a caterpillar tractor, the steel scales of some snakelike tank. She found herself shrinking fearfully from the tremors and vibrations, the ramp and the rush of it.

Sometimes when a car screamed at the bridge she felt that the angry squeal was meant for her. The nameless terror was upon her. She was to be crushed.

II

Then, there was Nicholas Bonthorn. He was not one of her trivialities, but the one big thing towards which all the little trickles of her tragedy tended. They seemed to coalesce in him, and to flow both to him and from him. Because she was loving

him now, not as the raw young sensationalist, but both as woman and child, in secret and in stealth, as a woman loves when that which is loved is like a face fading before a dying fire.

He came and sat by her window and talked, and the reality of him both terrified and ravished her, for it was a reality such as she had never dreamed of, perhaps because in crude action dreams are apt to be so shallow. For to those who can dream age brings a haunting vividness, and the simulacrum of reality, and in three months Rachel had grown old. The soul of her had unfolded suddenly, and with a burning completeness. She was hot youth and ripe maturity in one and the same body, no hard bud, but the open and sensitive flower. The very sex in her had become subtilized, the perfume associated with it æthereal and haunting. The "record" was so different, not a disk grating out some jazz tune, but *L'Après Midi*, or the prelude from *Tristan and Isolde*.

He talked to her as though she were alive, and would be still more alive, and this tantalized her. He talked to her about things—which—three months ago—would have seemed incredibly boring, for youth can be so easily and profoundly bored. Its instrument has so few strings. But her wounded self was conscious of and responsive to new over-tones. Even her thoughts were like a blackbird singing in some green, sad dusk.

"O, joy, O—anguish! I live—I die. Was ever anything so sad as loving?"

To begin with she talked to him in return. She told him things that she would have told to no other soul. She scattered herself like petals on the bed. And then—gradually—as love waxed in her—she grew inarticulate and shy. Something in her held back, and the hands of her soul faltered. She conceived despair. For what could she grasp? Reality would slip through her fingers. She could not touch him, possess him, and be possessed. She would be no better than a dead thing in love's arms, yes—and more tormenting than that, she would yearn to give, and be no more in the lap of life than a clogging, sterile stone.

She would lie and wait for his coming, and then—when he was with her—almost she would wish him away.

But, if he was aware of her increasing silence, of a pair of eyes watching him, he did not and could not comprehend all that

was happening behind those eyes. If he thought of her as a spray of white lilac, or as Snowy Mespillus, or a flower with a broken stalk, he was not the complete flower-master. As man he was apt to efface himself. He talked to her of impersonal things, as though to provoke her interest in them, not realizing that it did not matter about what he talked so long as he was the talker. He brought the dog to see her, but if she fell in love with the Cairn, it was largely because he was Bonthorn's dog.

There were times when she wanted to say to him: "I shan't live very long. It is better that I should not live very long. So, why should you be so very careful? There is in me that which is both bitter and sweet, and just because of the bitter and the sweet it is better that I should die. But you do not quite understand that, my dear, but I am not to you what you are to me. I lie and look and feel while you talk to me. I see you and all and everything as in a mirror, you see—only a paralyzed child in a bed. I'm still so much a child to you. Perhaps it is better so."

There were occasions when he told her funny stories, and tried to make her laugh, and she did laugh, because he wished her to, but he did not hear the echoes that her laughter left within her when he had gone.

His compassion was a little too immaterial. It walked hand in hand with love. It had not yet discovered in her that other flower, not Snowy Mespillus, but Love-Lies-Bleeding.

III

Sudden rain.

It came up from the south-west and from the bosom of a blue-black cloud at half-past three on a Saturday afternoon. At two, or perhaps seven, such a downpour would not have mattered, but when Rachel heard it on the stones and the chestnut leaves she knew that all those little tables had been laid. And five minutes ago the sun had been shining.

She heard Rhoda rush out.

"O, damn you! You dirty dog."

There was a clatter of hastily rescued china, with Mrs. Binnie's one active hand snatching at cloths.

"Well, really——! It might have——"

"Did you ever see such a bloody climate."

Yes, Rhoda was in one of her tempestuous moods, and the provocation was adequate, for after emptying itself upon the valley the black cloud passed, and left sunlight, and dripping leaves, wet chairs and tables, and a road that steamed.

More exasperation. Rhoda apostrophized the retreating blackness.

"Yes, that's right. Make a bloody mess of everything, and then sneak off. Why couldn't you stay and do it thoroughly?"

For, in ten minutes cars were pulling in, and the bell was clanging, and people who had escaped the rain were asking to have tea out of doors. And Rhoda was short with them.

"You'll have to come inside. We've had a young cloud-burst. Can't you see?"

They saw wet tables and chairs, but some of them discovered no reason why cloths should not be found, and the chairs and tables wiped. Rhoda tore down a roller-towel, and flung it at the most argumentative of the men.

"All right. Mop it up—if you want to sit outside. I've got too much to do."

At half-past four she charged in with Rachel's tea, and obviously that tray belonged to the category of last straws. She gave Rachel's table a twist, and put down the tray with such abruptness that the milk jug lost its balance.

"O, damn!"

She snatched at the small jug and rescued it with some milk left.

"Talk about the rush hour on the Tubes!"

Rachel lay very still.

"All right, Rho. There's some left."

She spoke almost humbly, and when Rhoda went striding out she continued to lie still, and for quite five minutes she did not touch her tea. She was beginning to feel that her sister hated her, or would learn to hate her if this sordid scuffle were to continue indefinitely.

IV

Nor did the tempest blow itself out, or spend itself in the business of feeding the multitude. It gathered to a climax. It

burst like that rain-cloud, and developed into an altercation with the forceful, florid mother of a family.

"We don't want any of your lip, young woman; we want tea."

Rhoda flared like a dark beacon. She had seen the family arrive like so many porkers packed into a small but pretentious car. It was the sort of family that had possessed a car for a week and a half, and had swelled in it. To Rhoda they had faces like sides of bacon.

She became arctic, but her tongue was a north wind. She could use a most scarifying tongue.

"If you want tea—you can go on to Lignor. You can crowd back into your tin pan and frizzle."

The woman's face was like a large pink ham.

"Impudence. I should just think we will go somewhere else. Bert, get the car out."

"Thank you," said Rhoda. "Try Canaan."

Mrs. Binnie had witnessed the scene, and she was shocked. Her temper was a small one, but she lost it, and it was swallowed up in her daughter's more capacious fury. They said things to each other. Their voices were raised, and Rachel heard them.

"Damn it—I'm fed up. I'm through—"

Rhoda stalked upstairs, crushed a small hat on her head, descended, and walked out of the door.

"I'm going to see Fred. I'd like a show of my own."

There was silence, though Rachel gathered that her mother was attending to the remnants of the day's necessity. The crowd on wheels had drifted on, but there were tables to be cleared. Rachel's window was shut, for Mrs. Binnie had come in and closed it towards the end of that devastating shower, but Rachel could hear the clink and clatter of spoons and china.

Then the sounds ceased. The storm had subsided, but it had subsided into a sort of lassitude, the stillness of surrender. The leaves of the chestnut tree still dripped, little splashes of green sadness.

She did not see Bonthorn pass, glance at her closed window, and go on. She was lying listening and staring at the ceiling, and feeling herself so responsible for that row. The silence troubled her, for she divined it as the silence of a tired little woman, who, on the edge of that relentless road, fought an unequal battle.

Meanwhile, Bonthorn, arriving in the open doorway, surprised a small figure seated on a rush-bottomed chair. Mrs. Binnie was alone with the dusk and the day's clutter, and possibly she was suffering from a sense of the futility of all human effort. She was not in tears. She had arrived for the moment in that dusty and draughty space behind the painted scene where faces do not manifest conscious emotion. She was at the back of herself and of everything.

Her small face looked like a white streak in the dusk of the room. She seemed to accept Bonthorn's presence as part of the day's inevitableness.

"O, Mr. Bonthorn—I'm beaten."

He entered the room and closed the door. She looked so very small, so narrow, like something laid out straight in a coffin.

"Well, tell me about it."

"My girl's left me."

"Rhoda—?"

"Yes, gone off in a huff. We've had a very trying day, Mr. Bonthorn, we have—really. Everything seems to have gone wrong of late. Yes, Rhoda's not one of the easy sort and she's had a lot to try her. But, Mr. Bonthorn, all this talk of going on strike. Some of us can't go on strike, can we?"

He sat on the edge of a table.

"No, of course not. But where has she gone?"

"To Lignor. You see—she's being pulled two ways, poor dear. She and Fred Tanrock. And we both lost our tempers, Mr. Bonthorn. There's some excuse for Rhoda, there is—really—but I oughtn't to have lost my temper."

Bonthorn smiled at her.

"Well, you have found it again, Mrs. Buck. Don't you think your daughter will find hers? If she's your daughter——"

Rachel lay listening. She had been able to hear all that had passed between them.

Chapter Twenty-One

I

To Bonthorn Mrs. Robinia's need was a pair of hands. He saw around her a dozen tables to be cleared, and though mere man he could infer piles of crockery waiting to be washed and put away. He lit a pipe, and seeing a big black tray leaning against a table leg, he collected it.

"I may as well give you a hand with all this."

Mrs. Binnie protested, but without conviction.

"O, Mr. Bonthorn, really—I couldn't think——"

But already he was packing crockery on the tray, and rising from her chair she accepted his intervention.

"We collect all the teapots together, Mr. Bonthorn."

"I see, there's a system. Supposing I leave you the teapots? What about milk jugs? Do they segregate?"

A little wisp of a smile seemed to blow across her face.

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, I'll concentrate on the cups and saucers and plates, and the etceteras."

He loaded his tray, and directed by her, he carried it into the kitchen. It was his first visit to the Mill House kitchen, and under its oak beams an afterglow filled the window with yellow light. It was a very clean kitchen, as Mrs. Gurney had found before him. He put his tray down on a big table; there was just room for the tray; the rest of the table was occupied by tins half full of cakes, bread crusts, a loaf and a half, and a plate containing yellow slabs of butter.

Mrs. Binnie followed him.

"O, on the table by the sink, Mr. Bonthorn, please."

"I see."

He understood the ritual. He arranged the crockery in order upon the washing-board.

"Get rid of the crumbs, don't I?"

"Yes, that bucket. But don't bother."

Bonthorn, using a knife, scraped the crumbs from the plates into the bucket.

Robinia was emptying out tea-leaves. He went with his tray for a second service, and had loaded it and had it in his hands when the front door swung open. It was Rhoda returning, a Rhoda who stared at him and closed the door firmly, and without apology or explanation reft the tray from him.

"All right. My job. No need for you to fuss."

He did not challenge the accusation. He just smiled at her, and went to recover a pipe that had been laid aside on a window-sill. As he had prophesied she had recovered her temper, and tucked it away behind firmly compressed lips. He saw her put down the tray for a moment, pull off her hat and throw it into a basket-chair, and resume the tray. She went striding towards the kitchen.

He heard the two voices.

"O, my dear—you did make me jump. I thought it was Mr. Bonthorn."

"You sit down. You're tired."

"No—I'm not."

"Sit down."

Bonthorn gathered that Mrs. Binnie did sit down, but only to humour the downright daughter.

"What's he messing about here for?"

"My dear——"

"Much better be talking to Rachel. Send him in."

Bonthorn had opened the front door, for it had not occurred to him that he could take himself and his pipe into a young woman's bedroom. Yes, obviously, Rhoda was making amends after her own forceful fashion, and he would be less superfluous and a case of offence to her out in the open air. He was a trousersed accusation, a reproach. He heard footsteps and the turning of a door-handle, and Mrs. Binnie's voice.

"Wouldn't you like the window open again, my dear?"

"Yes, mother."

"I'm sorry I forgot it. O, Mr. Bonthorn's here."

He accepted the suggestion, waiting until he heard the sash raised, and then walking along the front of the Mill House to

her window. He was smoking his pipe. And as he stood and looked at her lying there he wondered just how much she had heard and understood, and what effect it had had on her.

She smiled at him, but her smile was a wilful veiling of her mood, a gentle dissembling.

"You've been helping mother."

"To the best of my ability. Your sister had to go out."

"Yes."

Her muteness was like the muteness of extreme lassitude. She just lay and looked at him as though she had neither the desire nor the strength to talk. He had never seen her so still. Nothing moved, lips, eyelids or hands; almost he got the impression that she had ceased to breathe. She was like a creature sick unto death, and conscious and consenting. And he was troubled.

"You are tired to-night."

There was a faint movement of the head.

"Yes, in a way."

"Well, we won't talk. I'll just sit here. May I?"

"Yes, sit there."

II

The smoke from his pipe was blue in the dusk, and as he sat there on her window-sill he was conscious of more than the mere semblance of death, a white face very still on a white pillow, two hands stretched out. He was conscious of being looked at. Also, her eyes were more than eyes. They seemed to contain the whole of her, the inward conscious woman, the mystery of that other self. They did not merely gaze at him, and focus a figure. They seemed full of some dual comprehension, as though in her gazing and perceiving some picture of him and of her was enclosed in a little dark crystal.

For she was beginning to think how much easier it would be to die, and to wonder at old people for clinging to life as they did. It seemed to her that life and the relish for life were associated with the body, and that when your body failed you life was finished. All this talk about souls and beauty and the loveliness of an inner spiritual state was fudge. She supposed that old people talked that way, and tried to pretend that the pomp and passion of the great show did not matter.

But she was the child of her generation, and she had lain long enough on her back to know that youth is the one and only savour. So long as you felt the urge of your body and could give it life—you were alive. All the rest was flat fish, boiled cod and philosophy. When the flesh and the flare of the adventure were gone from you, was it worth while to sit in a chair and moralize?

She was the child of her generation, of a youth that craved speed and movement and change. It was not her dream to stand like a white lily in a garden and emit a faint, cloying and saintly perfume. She mourned her hot eager youth, even its discontents and its restlessness.

She thought: "They tell us that we do not know what we want. But we want things—blindly—bitterly. It is the want that matters. I know now what I want."

She looked at Bonthorn with her still, enigmatic eyes.

"I want to die. Even he makes me want to escape from this—nothingness. It would be so much easier for the others. Rhoda is young. This cold-storage body of mine exasperates her—just as it exasperates me. He's a dear, but he doesn't understand."

She observed him. She recalled her first impressions of Nicholas Bonthorn. He was so much the man with the sword, a sort of Christ Militant calling upon the world for heroism and high-mindedness. He embarrassed hungry humanity. He was the inexorable gentleman who, with radiant conscientiousness, would put on a clean shirt, and shave himself before stepping into his coffin.

And if she loved him, as she did, how could she live to his level? Always, she would have a feeling of clinging to his knees, of struggling to be what she was not. She could not make him part of the ardour of a young, live body.

No. She knew that she wanted to die.

III

Rhoda sailed in, a pragmatical, forceful Rhoda, making up in cheer for the lapses of an intolerant temper.

"Oh—I've seen Fred. Your super-pram is coming down tomorrow."

And Bonthorn, vaguely perplexed and disturbed by those dark eyes, took up the chant.

"That's splendid! The new chariot. She'll be able to see life on wheels, won't she, Miss Rhoda?"

Yes, obviously so, and Rhoda described the chair to him. It had a side let down so that Rachel could be transferred with ease from bed to chair. It had a steering handle and a brake, and could be propelled either by turning the wheels by hand or by working a lever. Fred Tanrock had designed and built the carriage in the workshop of the Tanrock garage.

Said Bonthorn: "You will have to drive up and see my garden."

Rhoda was the active optimist.

"Rather. In a week or so she'll be doing stunts on the way to London."

While Rachel lay and reflected that Bonthorn and her sister were treating her like a sick child who had to be humoured, and encouraged to take an interest in life. Her bed would be on wheels, but it would still be a bed; she would not have escaped from it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I

RACHEL's wheeled-chair arrived in a light motor-van, and when Tanrock and the driver of the van had unloaded it, the machine was wheeled to Rachel's window. It was quite a gay affair for the uses to which it would be put: being a kind of long, cream-coloured box mounted on red wire-wheels. It had a black hood that could be raised against sun and rain.

Young Tanrock got into the machine and, lying flat, gave a demonstration, circling round the chestnut tree and worming his way between chairs and tables.

"You see, she steers like a taxi."

He was flushed and a little excited. The occasion was very much his, and the new machine more than a toy. Rhoda had to get into it, and after her—Mrs. Binnie, but Mrs. Binnie's peregrinations were so erratic that she had to be rescued from under one of the posts and chains.

"O, dear—I'm afraid I've scratched the paint, Fred."

"Nothing to speak of, mother."

"You—are—clever, Fred."

"Let Rhoda have another shot."

Rhoda was more adventurous. She propelled the machine out on the road and over the bridge, and turning where the Beech Farm lane gave her room to reverse, she came back at speed, overshot the entrance and had to pull up on the grass. She sat up.

"I say—it's priceless, Fred."

But Tanrock had vanished.

"Where's Fred?"

Mrs. Binnie looked about her as though she expected to find the young man under one of the tables.

"Really—I don't know. He was here a moment ago."

The mechanic, standing by and smoking a cigarette, had

seen young Mr. Tanrock enter the Mill House, and there Rhoda found him, with a carpenter's folding rule, and an expression of humorous relief upon his face.

"My God, Rho, I had a shock. I'd forgotten to measure the bedroom doorway. Just—fancy!"

He laughed.

"Just two inches to spare. What shocks!"

The new toy was a present to Rachel, and when these grown-up people had played with it, the wheeled chair became hers. They were all so eager to put her into it and to take her out on show like some new baby all dressed up for the occasion. Even the district nurse arrived on her bicycle to supervise the adventure, a kind creature with a taste for superlatives and a complexion that lived the simple life and so had ceased to be anything but leather. The wheeled chair was insinuated into Rachel's room, and pushed beside her bed; it had a special mattress of its own.

"Now then, my dear, we'll get at you."

The phrase expressed Nurse Tamplin. She was aggressively kind. Her face shone when attacking with fomentation or with syringe. She talked all the time to Rachel or her assistants. The three of them would lift her, the nurse in the middle, Rhoda at the head, Mrs. Binnie at the feet. "When I say go, all together, lift." It was done most efficiently, and the body that was Rachel found itself transferred from bed to wheeled couch, and yet a part of her was left pendent in the air. An intangible, questioning melancholy. If it took three to lift her, how would they manage when the nurse was not here?

But that good woman seemed to divine the question.

"Yes, you see—I'm going by most days about half-past two.

I can slip off and give you a hand."

It was Rhoda who wheeled her out through the tea-room to the terrace. They stood round her as though to admire the new infant. Even the mechanic joined the group. And she felt like a piece of property, a doll in a pram, for obviously they were concerned with her as a body, a bambino. They stood around with kind faces, and said such simple things to her that almost she felt self-conscious, and ashamed of being so very sophisticated a child.

"Well, that's marvellous——"

She did remember to thank Fred, though how was poor Fred to know that he had provided her increasing purpose with the power to express itself?

"Fred—it's wonderful. I'm so awfully—grateful."

"O—that's all right, Rache. I had a great time making it."

Mrs. Binnie bent down and kissed her.

"Well—really—you do look sweet. Now, where would you like to go?"

Go? She had not thought about it, but obviously these dear, active people expected her to go somewhere. They were full of propulsive enthusiasm. And she closed her eyes for a moment, and wished they would not all stand staring at her. Did an infant ever feel like that? But she could not get away, and even if she was on wheels it was publicly so on the sea front.

"I'd like to go up the lane."

The word lane seemed to slip out of a crevice in her consciousness. She smiled brightly at her mother, who—dear soul—was so eager to see the sun shining.

"I'll take you. Nurse, do have a glass of lemonade and a piece of cake. And Fred too—and this gentleman. I'm sorry I haven't any beer."

The mechanic put her at ease on that score.

"We're a coffee-and-bun crowd, these days, ma'am."

The machine could be either pulled or propelled, and a handle like the handle of a bath-chair could be attached by a couple of pins to the floating front axle. This was explained to Mrs. Binnie and to Rachel. "When anyone's pulling you, you don't have to steer." Mrs. Binnie went in to put on a hat, while Fred demonstrated how the hood was raised and lowered.

"Like it up or down, Rache?"

"O, down, please."

The group stood to give them a send-off. The road was quiet for the moment, and Mrs. Binnie, with her two small arms sticking out behind her, set off with her haulage and her joke. "I don't know whether I'm a goat or a moke." They cheered her, Rhoda waving a table-cloth, Fred Tanrock a hat. Nurse Tamplin wheeled out her bicycle and prepared to attack the next case. The mechanic, getting into the driving-seat of the light

van, backed her into the yard, and drove out on to the road with the van's nose pointing towards Lignor.

The nurse mounted her bicycle.

"That's about the best bit of work you've turned out, Mr. Tanrock."

Fred Tanrock rather thought so too..

II

In late summer the lane was a deep-green cleft, the hedges meeting overhead where thorn touched thorn. There was a center way between two ruts worn by the wheels of the Beech Farm wagons and tumbrils. A strip of turf sloped slightly to each hedge-bottom, where golden rod and fleabane caught the scattered sunlight.

To Rachel it was a new world. She had not seen it before as she saw it now, a vertical world spreading above her. She lay flat in her wheeled chair, a horizontal creature, aware of the branches overhead, a fretwork of leaves and sky. The chair rocked slightly. She could see the upper half of Mrs. Binnie, and two taut little arms attached to the handle. It was like lying in a boat and gliding up some green backwater.

Half-way up the lane her mother paused.

"Feeling all right, Rachie?"

"Quite. It's not too much for you?"

Mrs. Binnie was a little out of breath, and enjoying it.

"No, not really. And to think it's the first time you've been out. Must seem nice."

Rachel was looking up into the heart of an oak tree. It was full of flickering light.

"Yes—funny. You don't see things on the level."

Robinia cocked her head like a bird.

"Looking up. Yes, it must be different—in a way."

"Quite different. It's surprising."

Mrs. Binnie nodded at her, smiled, and plodded on again between the two ruts. The sky was very blue, with a few clouds floating at their leisure. They came to the big beech tree, and a stretch of grass and of fern, and the holly hedge and white gate of Yew End, and that other gate with the meadows beyond it.

The ruts were less deep here, and Mrs. Binnie was able to pull the wheeled chair into the shade of the beech tree.

"Pff—flies!"

She was hot, and she had a little halo of flies round her head, but Rachel was not being worried by them.

"Try a piece of bracken, mumsie."

Mrs. Binnie broke off two fronds, and gave one of them to her daughter. She sat down on the grass beside the chair and fanned the air with her plume of bracken.

"Wretched things. Always when you don't want them. But it's lovely here, isn't it, poppet?"

"Yes."

"And that's Mr. Bonthorn's gate. He does keep that holly hedge beautiful. It's like a green wall with a hole cut in it. I've never been inside. I expect it's lovely."

Rachel lay silent, gazing at the mass of the tree. She was thinking of that moonlight night, and of Bonthorn's sudden coming, and the strangeness of his words: "Christ is risen." Mrs. Binnie's fern frond was in active movement. Somewhere a dove crooned.

The Stella Lacey clock struck four, and at the bridge a motor hooted, and to Mrs. Binnie the day resumed its urgent necessities. She stood up, still warning off flies.

"O, dear, four o'clock."

Rachel understood her. Down at the Mill House people would be demanding tea, and Rhoda was alone there.

"Mumsie—you could leave me here. I shall be all right. You or Rhoda could fetch me presently."

"But—your tea, Rachie?"

"This—is better than tea. It's so peaceful."

Probably the world would not have acquitted Mrs. Binnie of the charge of conspiring to place her daughter outside Mr. Bonthorn's gate, but Mrs. Binnie was not an ulterior person, and Rachel was left in the shade of the beech tree. She could see nearly the whole of the great green vault with its dark groining of branches. The sky was blotted out by the mosaic of those innumerable leaves. On the side towards the sun there was more yellow in the foliage. On the smooth, ash-grey trunk some lover

many years ago had carved a heart and two letters, E & A. There was a soft whirr of wings and a dove settled overhead and began to croon, and Rachel lay and searched for the bird, but for a long time she could not see it. Nor did she see it until the bird flew away and showed to her the fan of its tail spotted with white. But all this was new to her. She was conscious of a little thrill of pleasure and surprise. Lying on her back on this late day in summer she had discovered a new dimension of branches and of birds. Almost, she felt herself floating up into it, but the full significance of this other world had not yet been revealed to her. She had both to die and to live. She would have to sink into surrender, to traverse the cold green disillusionment of an English spring, to look at life not merely as Rachel, but as a creature who was somehow bird and tree and cloud and flower.

III

She was discovered. A little, hairy head appearing with two black dots for eyes and one for nose, confronted her from under the holly hedge. Rollo the Cairn had a particular bolthole of his own, and sighting this strange object in the shade of the beech tree, he protested, first with a little, indignant gruffness, and then with loud, sharp barks.

She turned her head and saw the dog, ears and hair erect, his little, sturdy elbows turned out.

She called him by name, "Rollo—Rollo," but he was suspicious, full of a sense of property, and barking he came to investigate this thing on wheels and the creature in it. He sniffed at the wheels, but when she put out a hand and tried to coax him to her he was in two moods. The small ears went back; he wagged up close to the hand, tail wagging, lips retracted and then suddenly stood off and continued to bark at her.

She spoke to him again.

"Rollo, come and make friends."

His bright eyes watched her. Obviously he was convinced that she and her machine needed investigating, by superior authority. His bark said: "Come and look at this thing I have found, a very questionable object—outside—our—gate." And Bonthorn,

coming down from the little house to the white gate, saw this fierce and very responsible brown atom confronting Rachel.

"Hallo—hallo!"

The dog whisked about and raced for him, ears back, tail stretched out, and Bonthorn bent down and picked him up.

"Nice way of treating a lady. Come along and apologize."

Rollo, making furious attempts to lick the whole of a face with one small tongue, was carried across to Rachel's chair.

"All right, all right, young fellow."

He was looking at Rachel and not at the dog, and Rollo, realizing that this other thing somehow interested his master, became prick-eared and observant, and quite still in the man's arms.

"Your first outing? Well—I was wondering——"

She looked up at him and smiled, but her smile had a dimness. A moment ago her new world had seemed so impersonal, and now he was here.

"Mother brought me. She had to go back."

He walked round the chair, examining it, the dog alert in his arms.

"Splendid. That nice lad contrived it?"

"Yes. A present."

"Just what you wanted."

Her head made a slight movement on the pillow. His words had reminded her of all that her consciousness craved and could not claim. She closed her eyes for a moment. And then she felt the dog's paws on her body, and heard Bonthorn's voice:

"He wants to be introduced. Funny little chap. But he's rather lovable."

She drew the dog to her and held him, and Rollo, with a sudden fury of affection, licked her neck and ears. There was no need for Bonthorn to say: "Gently—gently," for the little beast seemed to understand that this other creature could not play rough games. "O, you darling." She kissed his head. And then, quite suddenly, her face grew all shimmering and strange, and her mouth poignant.

Bonthorn was shocked. He went and stood behind her as though he understood that she would not wish to be looked at too closely. This sudden emotion, like rain on green leaves!

Rollo, aware of something very strange, sat up and looked at her with his head on one side. What was this funny expression?

Bonthorn spoke.

"Why shouldn't I take you round the garden. May I?"

She made a movement of the head.

"Yes, please. If——"

"O, there's no one about. Just you and I and the dog."

He crossed to the gate, opened it, and coming back, saw the dog lying with his hind legs stretched out after the manner of Cairns. He was licking Rachel's hands.

She said: "I'm sorry to be so silly. It just——"

"It just happened. Why shouldn't it? Life's like that."

Her eyes fixed themselves on his two big brown hands, as, facing her, he guided the wheeled chair through the gate in the holly hedge. Then he turned about, and beyond the height and the breadth of him she saw the garden, and the little white house with its green shutters and white latticed porch. She lay with two tears still on her cheeks, and thought: "Yes—I would wish to see all this—before I go away." One hand stroked the dog who lay and blinked at her ecstatically. They went on past the cherry tree, and round the darkness of two old yews to the gate in the thorn hedge.

Bonthorn paused here.

"What about tea?"

She looked up at him.

"O, don't bother."

"You haven't had it?"

"No."

"O, well, we'll have it here in the garden."

He left her for a moment, and she heard his voice beyond the yews.

"Martha. Tea for two—under the cherry tree—please. Yes, in about twenty minutes."

He came back. He stood beside her for a moment, and tickled the dog's neck, and she was very conscious of his nearness. She—too—wanted to be touched by him, and yet she was afraid.

"Nice things—animals. So natural and transparent, and so easily pleased. So wholesomely greedy and grateful. No complexes. What about it, young fellow?"

Rollo blinked at him—"I'm very comfortable, thank you."

They passed on through the gate in the thorn hedge into the sacred precinct, and suddenly she saw the world in which he worked and lived. It was very beautiful and she had become much more sensitive to beauty. Almost it hurt her. It was like that which yearned in her, desire, despair, the unattainable. She half closed her eyes and saw the place as a blur of colours, sheaves of asters, sunflowers, dahlias, golden rod, helenium, hollyhock, late phloxes. The whole place seemed to glow, and up above she saw the softly-wooded hills and a quiet sky.

He paused and stood at gaze and his face was not as she had seen it before. It seemed part of the stillness. She would have said that something entered into him and filled him. It was as though he stood in the midst of a circle of light.

And then he looked at her, and smiled. It was not that he expected her to say anything, to exclaim, to make polite remarks to the garden. To him flowers were creatures with a sense of humour. He had heard them laugh. He could remember hearing the laughter of flowers, a shivering, bell-like sound. Some leathery lady with no complexion and hair anyhow—making remarks, yes—such personal remarks. "Yes, quite nice, but they look so untidy." And the sudden laughter of flowers.

"Lovely things, aren't they. But you need not tell them so."

She lay with half-closed eyes, wondering. It was his garden, and yet she felt that he did not think of it as his garden. It belonged to the things that grew in it.

She said: "It's very beautiful."

He stood with head up, as though listening to the voice within her voice.

"It hurts you. Why?"

She had a moment of breathlessness. How did he know that? How had she betrayed herself? This question—!

"Yes. It shouldn't do, should it?"

"O, that depends. It used to hurt me—till I got hold of the secret. The 'Open Sesame.'"

She looked at him over the dog's head.

"Is there a secret?"

"O, yes. It may sound either very simple—or rather sententious. That—too—depends. Sink yourself. Get rid of the wretched

little ego that wants to root things up and possess them. We're such children. We want to clutch and shout: 'Mine.'"

She saw his hands grasp the handle. They went on. And suddenly she knew that his words had hurt her more than had the beauty of these flowers. Yes, she wanted things, she wanted them desperately, and because they were beyond her passionate hands she wanted to die.

IV

She lay under the cherry tree, beside a table, and watched the dog who was sprawling on the grass and playing with a rubber bone. He balanced it between his fore-paws and on the tip of a black nose. It was very much his bone.

Did the man beside her realize that?

Also, the foliage of the cherry tree was so different from the foliage of the beech. It let more light through, and you could see more sky. In the days of her freedom she had not noticed things as she noticed them now, and she wondered why. Was it that she had been in too much of a hurry, too full of herself and her youth? But was not that understandable? She had been more concerned in living than in looking, but now like a prisoner with one small window to peer through she saw more outside that window.

Bonthorn had left her for a moment, and suddenly she heard his voice behind her.

"Yes, we'll have it here, Martha."

Martha became visible to her. She was putting the tea-tray down on the table, and her face was like the front of a house with its door and windows shut. Martha had black hair on her upper lip, and a tight, hard forehead. Her eyes seemed to avoid looking at the girl in the wheeled chair.

"This is Miss Rachel, Martha."

The grey eyes of Martha gave her a kind of snapping glance. "Good afternoon."

And Rachel's lips moved—only to remain mute. She smiled very faintly at the unexpected severity of Martha. For, obviously, Martha did not approve of her, and was unfriendly, and grudged her her tea under the cherry tree in Mr. Bonthorn's garden.

But Bonthorn was speaking.

"Have you got such a thing as a feeding-cup, Martha?"

Martha stood straight and severe.

"A feeding-cup, Mr. Bonthorn! We haven't any use for such a thing."

"Well, a small tea-pot with a lid that doesn't fall off."

Martha looked at him as though he was in one of his fantastical moods.

"A small tea-pot?"

"Yes, you see—Miss Rachel can't manage very well with a cup. Go and find a small tea-pot."

And Martha went.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I

THERE were occasions when Rachel overheard things that she was not meant to hear, for Rhoda had one of those voices that penetrate closed doors, and do not lack emphasis.

"I'll see you through the winter. What about getting one of Aunt Annie's girls and training her? Gertie's just about the age. You'll have to have someone."

Rhoda's vibrant voice seemed to strike on a soft woolly surface and to produce a little murmur from Robinia.

"Well—Rache is not going to get any better. And I'm not satisfied. Carver ought to have sent her up to London."

There were other worries that found their way into Rachel's room, though they were not supposed to have the right of entry. She had so much time to lie and listen, and to reflect like a sensitive mirror the happenings in and about the house. For a month the weather had been disastrous. They had experienced five wet week-ends in succession, and at a time of the year when the Mill House might count on making money. And what was still more exasperating, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday would be fine, and Friday, Saturday and Sunday windy and grey and wet.

Wasted cakes, wasted bread, superfluous preparations, tables and chairs stacked away, the road black and empty. Their takings were down by pounds and pounds. Rachel noticed that they did not bring her the books to enter up. They kept those depressing figures from her.

But she had heard Rhoda standing amid wet tables and saying exactly what she thought of the English climate.

"Well, of all the bloody weather! That's right, drown us."

One word of Rhoda's fixed itself like a burr on the edge of her consciousness. On four days out of seven she was being mewed up in the house, for in such weather the new chair was useless.

And as she lay there she began to think of the winter; and the inevitableness of the winter frightened her. The dark, desolate mornings, the slopes of Stella Lacey all grey, dusk creeping in, hours and hours of lamplight. Nothing happening. And perhaps one of those raw, anæmic cousins co-opted into the family, to take Rhoda's place, a stranger, but a stranger who was sufficiently well-known to be disliked.

And Bonthorn was away. He had gone off on a ten-days' holiday to visit gardens, his only holiday in the year, though the Chelsea Show and Vincent Square saw him for a few hours. He had come down to the Mill House on the evening before he left, a wet, grey evening, but there had been no meeting at the window. He had sat for five minutes with Mrs. Binnie beside Rachel's bed, and in the dusk his face had had a dimness. It had tantalized her.

"Use my garden. Take her up there, Mrs. Buck."

Had her mother's presence made those five minutes seem so dim and formal? But what else could she expect? And when he had gone she had fallen into a mood of self mockery. She was a silly, sentimental little idiot in love with a man because he was kind to her. Yes, kind—was the word. And she was weary of kindness, of the patient tolerance of the world, of ministrations that made her feel less than some helpless, unclean infant.

It seemed to her that her mother's face had grown smaller. It was a pathetic little face peering anxiously through a slit in a fence.

"Now, Rachie, legs—my dear."

The daily ritual endured. She was rubbed and electrified. She would lie and watch her mother's busy hands and those two white, waxlike members that were hers and not yet hers. She had begun to loathe them, to regard them as alien things, horrible, absurd appendages. She was weary of her body, O—so weary of it. Often she wanted to say to her mother: "Stop. What's the use? I'd be much better dead."

But she did not say it. She could not say it.

She lay there with a deceptive calmness, an apparent patience that deceived those who saw her day by day. She was a wax flower in a glass case. Even Nurse Tamplin was beguiled.

"Well—I think she's a perfect angel."

And she was feeling like a devil, not so much in the ethical sense, but in regard to her bitter hatred of her own body. There were moments when she wanted to do violent things to it, and to tear it in pieces, to destroy it.

II

Mrs. Binnie was a little blind. She saw Rachel day by day, and to Robinia every day was a sort of scramble. She was like a little animal scuttling round in a cage, turning a wheel. So much of her was externalized.

It happened to be sunny, and Rachel was lying out in her wheeled chair under the chestnut tree when Stella Lacey came to the Mill House. Mrs. Gurney had been wandering round Skye and Lewis, and feeling as she always felt the unreality of those strange islands, so brilliant and yet so dim, so near to the edge of some other world. Great blue-black shadows, and the sudden weeping clouds, and the mountains blurred, and the sea all colours. Stacks of peat, and white gulls, and the desolate purple of the heather, and the wind, and sudden sunlight near or far away.

She came and sat down by Rachel's chair. She looked at her. Her lips uttered a few pleasant, facile words, but within her the intuitive cry was instant.

"This girl is going to die."

She did not stay long with Rachel, for Rachel was not wanting anybody near her. She lay and listened to what Mrs. Gurney had to say, but only because it was Mrs. Gurney who was speaking, and not because anything that was said could matter. And Mrs. Gurney spoke cheerfully.

"I am so glad you have this chair. You will be able to get about now. You must come up and see me at Stella Lacey."

Rachel thanked her.

"I should love to, Mrs. Gurney."

But her voice was the voice of a mechanism responding to the click of a lever, and her bright apathy was no more deceiving than one of those confectionery faces that are so hideously young and so deplorably old. Lying there in that long and narrow box on wheels she suggested to Gloriana youth in its coffin.

Mrs. Gurney said more bright things.

"Yes, you must come up and see me," and she was accused by Rachel's eyes of behaving like some tiresome person who stands beside a child's bed making cheerful and foolish noises. She felt that she had been guilty of blowing a tin trumpet and bouncing a doll up and down, and suddenly the eyes of this girl had disconcerted her.

She rose.

"Is your mother in?"

Yes, Mrs. Binnie was always in, and to be found in the kitchen, but it was no more possible to say certain things to Robinia than it had been to say them to the daughter. The gentle cynic in Mrs. Gloriana sat down and talked and listened to Mrs. Binnie. Mrs. Binnie still had her illusion, perhaps because the woman who spends herself must feel that she is getting some return for her money. She was not exactly a fatuous optimist, but she did believe that it was her duty to carry on.

"O, we manage somehow. One—does—you know—Mrs. Gurney, when you're put to it. And Rachel's so patient."

That was one of Mrs. Binnie's illusions, but how could you shatter it, for to the impartial eyes of Mrs. Gurney Rachel was anything but patient. Yet Mrs. Binnie had to be allowed her illusion.

"That wheeled chair should make a good deal of difference to her. Can she work it herself?"

"O, yes, she's getting quite clever at it, Mrs. Gurney. We tease her and say she'll be breaking records."

"So she's interested. That's everything."

Mrs. Binnie was icing a cake. As a matter of fact it was to be Rachel's birthday-cake, nor would she have allowed that birthdays could become superfluous, because a woman remained at forty for a great number of years, and so much of life is wilful pretending. Icing cakes, making pink squiggles on a white surface. Yes, so much of life was like that.

"Besides," said Mrs. Binnie, as though reinforcing an argument that had never been opened, "you're to be envied if you've got something to worry about, provided it's not all about yourself. It means——"

Mrs. Gloriana understood just what it meant, that you were

alive, that you mattered to people. When worry ceased from worrying you were finished with life.

"Yes, when things become too comfortable—we become bored."

Mrs. Binnie waved her icing-bag.

"Not much chance of that for me, Mrs. Gurney. Cornucopias; the peace and plenty idea. Rather like an old-fashioned Sunday, too much dinner, too much sitting about—yawns. Yes, to enjoy life you've got to be kept a bit on the thin and hungry side. That's a thing those silly Socialists don't seem to understand. When they've put everybody in the same sort of nice little house, and everybody's garden's just so, and there's nothing for anybody to worry about, and the doctor's paid before you're ill, and there are no 'speshul models' in the shop windows! What about it?"

"Yes, what about it, Mrs. Buck?"

"Why—people will be so bored that we'll have to have another sort of revolution just to brighten things up and get going again. Yes, a good old human smash-up."

Mrs. Gurney was ready to agree with her, but Mrs. Binnie's views upon social problems could not supply her daughter with a new pair of legs and with a fresh set of illusions. For might not life itself be an illusion? and without illusion there is no life, the illusion that as saints we little people matter. Mrs. Gurney saw life as a series of illusions; Mrs. Binnie lived on an illusion; that was the difference between them.

But Mrs. Gloriana had one more glimpse of Rachel, a Rachel who was trundling her wheeled chair across the terrace, and whose sudden eyes met those of the departing lady.

"I see you can guide it yourself."

"Yes, quite well now."

They smiled faintly at each other as though recognizing the fatuity of such social interchanges, and Mrs. Gurney passed on. What idiotic remarks one made in the presence of a disconcerting reality, for to Mrs. Gurney those two dead dark eyes in the bright pallor of the girl's face were the most relentless realities. She felt that Rachel had no illusions. Life was a thing to be lived, a physical phenomena, and if—for some reason—you were unable to live it with full-fleshed ferocity—you were better dead. Yes, just as growing old was a tragedy, and just as man's

secret rage against growing old had produced Moses and the prophets. "Go up, thou bald-head." The irreverent, merciless realism of youth.

These modern young things did not humbug themselves. They made no attempt to disguise a corpse by dressing it up with ribbons, and rouging its face, and calling the process philosophy, or art, or ethics. The only thing that mattered was life, and the satisfactions one got from life—yes, obviously, and that was what Rachel knew. She had not sat subdued in the presence of old man Jehovah. It was not a question of being good, or dutiful, or clean or truthful, it was a question of being alive, and active on your legs.

All the rest was sheer bunk, the paint and feathers, and rattling bones and mumbo-jumbo of the old medicine man. A ragged, bald Jehovah in a rage against youth, envying David his Bathsheba, and to save his senility inventing sin!

Mrs. Gloriana went back to her garden, and she knew that even her garden was a subterfuge, a soporific. Just pottering. You pottered, and tried to persuade yourself that your potterings mattered. And that was why the eyes of Rachel had hurt her. They had said: "You are old, and so you don't matter. I'm old—because I am paralyzed, and so I don't matter. We are allowed to live—because there are sentimental people in the world who think they ought to keep us alive. We have to try and live up to the sentimentalists, and that's what's so terrible. We should be much better dead."

The ruthless realism of those dark eyes confronted her from the breadth of a white pillow!

III

Rachel practised with her wheeled couch. She was unable to manœuvre it through doorways unless she could head straight for the doorway, or someone slewed the back wheels round for her, and so started her on her way. But the machine gave her definite mobility, it put it within her power to perfect her project. Her bed could move.

It gave her a little feeling of adventure to potter out on the road when the road happened to be quiet, and to propel herself

as far as the end of the lane or into the yard at the back of the mill. Her sense of adventure was limited, and because of its obvious limitations she herself had set a definite end to it. Her explorations were no more extensive than those of a child navigating a tub in a horse-pond, and intrinsically they were far less exciting. She got no pleasure out of it, for where the child's tub would be bumping against the bank her boat on wheels ran up against other limitations, and it was the live self that was jarred, and recoiled.

She wished to be allowed her gesture, and it would be a gesture of self-effacement.

She wanted to cease from existing because the business of existing was both boring and bitter, and because being in love seemed to add to its bitterness. She wanted to set Mrs. Binnie free, for though her mother might weep once a week for the rest of her life, she would have leisure to do it in, and she would be able to sit in a chair. Yes, she simply could not live up to these devoted and sentimental people. Almost she preferred Rhoda, and Rhoda's young egotism.

Having brought her chair to the edge of the road she confronted that smooth tarred surface and those passing machines. She had only to wait for her opportunity, give the wheels a turn and send her chair gliding under the nose of some char-a-banc or lorry. It would be so supremely easy. But something in her recoiled from that sort of bloody squelch. Moreover, she realized that it would be kinder to leave an illusion behind her. The thing must appear accidental. She lay and reflected. Her lassitude was all for quietism.

IV

Did she wish to see Bonthorn again?

Yes, and no, and the passionate "yes" seemed to render the "no" more emphatic. She did not think that she could bear to see him again. He understood her too well and yet not at all. She was a flower with a broken stem and he should have known that such a flower is finished. But he would have said that she was woman, soul, spirit, not a mere complex of cells, and that as spirit she could transcend matter and the luxations of matter.

He wanted to make of his love a little green-painted stick, and lash her to it, and bid her lift up her head and live.

But how was it possible?

She would have cried to him—not “Help me to live”—but “Help me to die.”

For that was one of the superstitions that astonished her. This religion of keeping people alive! As though there was no sense and honesty in the business of dying and wanting to die, when life was bankrupt in you, a survival mere hypocrisy. Why, by choosing to die, should one be accused of sinning against society? As though society cared twopence about it.

For, in the newspapers society might make a pretence of caring. It was copy, or like one of the many “isms,” but only upon the new roads was society consistent. It killed and was killed, and no one suffered any great loss of sleep because of it. Besides, the circus must have its thrill.

She did not realize how like the life of the road was to the life of a circus until there was a bad crash at the bridge, and a small saloon car overturned and burst into flames. Its four occupants were roasted like chestnuts. Rachel had heard the screams of the trapped women. The thing happened about tea-time, and Mrs. Binnie hurried in and pulled down Rachel's blind, as though Rachel needed protecting from any such horror.

The Mill House terrace was crowded, and Rachel heard the rush for the bridge, the pushing back of chairs, the excited exclamations. The glare of the burning car made patterns upon the blind. She heard a man shouting. Apparently, the driver of a lorry had tried to open one of the doors, and had been badly burned. She lay very still in bed.

The people began to come back. The lorry driver was brought into the Mill House, and Mrs. Binnie routed out a bottle of salad-oil, and smothered his burnt hands with it. Someone was telephoning to Lignor. Traffic was piling up and blocking the road.

Rachel lay and listened to the voices of the people who had returned to their teas. She heard a woman say: “Put the jam away, Fred. No—I can't eat any more.” Another voice was a little hysterical. A man said: “That's what comes of having your petrol tank in the front.” Yet another voice poured abuse

upon the bridge: "Regular death-trap. There ought to be a thirty-foot roadway. One asks for a chance."

But the most surprising voice of all was that of a woman who came and sat down under the chestnut tree, and quite close to Rachel's window.

"My dear—I enjoyed every bit of it."

But just how surprising was that declaration? The thrill, the sensation! And somehow it did not surprise Rachel. She had begun to understand that a part of life is like that. Her mother rushing in to pull down a blind, and these other people—or some of them—to whom the road had exhibited a real, live, sanguinary show!

Mrs. Binnie's little anxious face reappeared.

"It hasn't upset you, Rachie, has it?"

"No, mumsie—I'm all right."

Mrs. Binnie hurried out again, and Rachel lay and listened to the voices, and to the confusion upon the road where the blind impetus of progress had been halted for a moment. Someone was shouting: "Go on, sir, go on." A car trumpeted like an impatient beast. And then, gradually, the confusion seemed to sort itself out; the clockwork trains ran to and fro. She supposed that someone was dealing with that charred relic, while speed reasserted itself, and the road resumed normality.

Yes, death was just an accident.

The only thing that really mattered, and against which the new world had a grievance—was the narrowness of that bridge.



Chapter Twenty-Four

I

SHE waited upon her opportunity.

It came to her on the day before Bonthorn was expected back at Yew End.

"The Regal" at Lignor was showing *Journey's End*, and Fred Tanrock had come down in a car to collect Rhoda. It was suggested that Mrs. Binnie should go with them, and Rachel, who was lying on her wheeled bed under the chestnut tree, overheard the arguments, and her mother's protests.

"No, really—I can't leave Rachel."

Rachel closed her eyes for a moment as though a glare of light had been let suddenly into a darkened room. She called to those others.

"Rhoda—Fred. Take her with you. I shall be all right."

Mrs. Binnie came to her, looking bothered.

"But—really—I——"

"Yes, do, do, mother. I'd like you to enjoy yourself."

Robinia was persuaded, partly because Rachel seemed so eager for her to go, and after all there were no reasons to be advanced against her going. The day was a Tuesday, and the tea-hour was over, and any loss of custom would be limited to the price of a few glasses of lemonade. Mrs. Binnie went in to put on her hat, and Rachel asked to be moved to the other side of the Mill House so that she would be in the sun.

Fred Tanrock wheeled her round.

"Where would you like to be, Rache?"

"Oh, in the gallery. I like to lie and look at the water."

He arranged her chair on the wooden staging at the back of the Mill House above the disused mill-race and the upper pool. He did not question her choice. She was in the evening sunlight here, and out of view, with the river and the green valley to be looked at. And she had a book.

"Not a bad spot—either, Rache."

Mrs. Binnie came hurrying round.

"Really, it does seem selfish leaving you like this."

"You don't often have two hours off, dear."

"We'll come straight back when the show's over. It won't be late, Fred, will it?"

"No, I'll run you back."

"But you'll be in the dark, Rache."

She smiled at her mother.

"Well, that won't frighten me."

Mrs. Binnie bent down to kiss her, and Rachel's arms went round her mother's neck.

"Enjoy yourself, dear; you deserve it."

Mrs. Binnie was kissed with tenderness, but the embrace roused in her no suspicion, Rachel had always been an affectionate child.

"Sure you'll be all right—my darling?"

"Of course."

It occurred to Rachel at that moment that her mother was looking quite pretty. Yes, she supposed that there had been a time when her mother—— But how strange! And why was it strange? She drew a hand softly across Mrs. Binnie's cheek.

"You do look nice. Good-bye."

Mrs. Binnie's face was all puckered up with pleasure.

"Well—really! I'm going to enjoy myself. Yes, really."

They were gone, and Rachel lay for a while with her eyes closed as though wishing to be alone for a minute with the memory of her mother's face. She was glad that she had seen it like that, both glad and yet infinitely sorry. Would she be too terribly hurt——? But, after all, it might be kinder to cut a rope with one stark flash of a knife than to leave the strands to chafe and fray themselves out. Journey's End. She opened her eyes and looked about her at this world of the senses. It was very beautiful, and so peaceful. She was glad that the sun was shining.

How green everything was, the meadows, the flags and water weeds, the willows! A September greenness. And the water! It seemed to swell between emerald cushions like liquid glass. It reflected the willows and the red brick and grey stone of the old building, and the white posts and rails of the gallery. Swallows

were skimming, and now and again they seemed to touch the water. A little V-shaped track showed where a rat was swimming. She heard a moor-hen's cry.

How green and alive and lovely, but how bitterly green, how hurtful in its liveliness! The shimmer of the light upon the water played upon the surface of the wall. She stretched out a hand and touched the wall; it was quite warm; the sunlight had warmed it. Would the water be as warm? And she was aware of a sudden catching of her breath, a spasm as of the live flesh of her contracting, resisting, struggling. Yes, the water would be cold, and so final.

She was afraid, and in a sudden agony of spirit she cried out against her fear.

"Coward! O, you poor, beastly funk! If you haven't the courage to live—surely——?"

She looked at the white posts and rails. She measured the height of the rail at the far end of the gallery. Yes, there was room for the wheeled chair to pass under it, and below lay deep water. She had only to put her hands to the wheels, shut her eyes, and let herself slip over the edge. It would be over so quickly.

And afterwards? O, but she did not believe in any afterwards. Death was just a going to sleep.

She put her hands to the wheels, moved the chair a foot or so, and paused.

No, just a minute more, just a last glimpse of that green world. She was like a child with the medicine glass at her lips: "Just a minute; O—just a minute. I'll drink it, yes, but please let me wait just a minute——"

II

She uttered a sudden, sharp cry, and lay panting.

"How long have you been there?"

"Only just come."

"You startled me—most horribly."

She had seen a shadow on the wall, and had realized that someone was standing just behind her chair. Bonthorn? But who else could it be but Bonthorn appearing like some angel of the Lord

to trouble poor humanity. O, damnable interference! Just when she had made up her mind, and got her courage to the sticking point. O, damn his dear, disastrous, futile interference.

She was angry.

"I thought it was to-morrow——"

"Well, so it should have been. Have I done wrong in coming back a day earlier?"

"You startled me."

"I'm sorry. I saw you from the end of the lane, lying here in the sun."

"O, you saw me lying in the sun."

"Yes. And I dared——"

He stood beside her chair, and was aware of her two restless hands and her strangely sullen face. What was the matter? Surely, if he had startled her the reaction was out of all proportion to the offence? That cry of hers, and her hurried breathing, and those restless and errant hands!

He said: "I'm sorry. I did not mean to startle you like this. I found the house shut up, and I thought——"

"They have gone to the pictures. O, don't sit there! It isn't safe."

He had made as though to sit on one of the rails, and she knew that one or two of the posts were rotten. Yes, when you were short of money some things had to be left in disrepair. He was standing between her and the water, and his shadow lay across her face. Did he suspect? She wished that he would not stand and look at her so intently with that one blue eye. She could not bear to be looked at; she could not bear him so near—and somehow so intimately near—just when her despair had stripped itself of all illusions. For he was life, bidding her live, clutching at her suddenly and passionately. She felt torn, distracted, and so helpless.

She closed her eyes. She tried to speak casually.

"Did you have a good time?"

Yes, he had had quite a good time. He began to tell her where he had been, but not as though it mattered. He was watching her, and she understood that the words he uttered were mere pebbles thrown into a pool. He was saying other and more urgent things to her and to himself. She kept her eyes closed.

And suddenly she felt his hand touching her shoulder, and she lay rigid.

"Has anything happened—while I've been away?"

"Anything? No."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure."

She was trembling. She knew that she could not go on lying there with her eyes shut. Oh, if only he would go away! This bitter, exquisite, hopeless interference! He did not understand.

Her hands clutched the sides of the chair. He had bent down and kissed her on the forehead. She opened her eyes wide.

"O, don't—please——"

She stared up into his face. It frightened her, for it was the face of a lover.

"You mustn't—— It hurts me—— I——"

He stood very still.

"Why should it hurt you? Can't you understand——?"

Her eyelids flickered.

"I'm dead. I can't bear—this—— It makes me so unhappy."

"Unhappy? The one thing in all the world—I want to save you from. Rachel——"

A bell rang, the bell over the front door of the Mill House. Both of them heard it, and the urgent—compelling clangour of it. Her eyes opened wide. She spoke.

"Someone's there. They may want petrol. O, please go and see."

For a moment he seemed to hesitate. He smiled at her with a peculiar gentleness, a tender tolerance.

"All right. I dare say I can deal with them."

She heard him move away. She lay wild eyed for a moment until she supposed him out of sight. Then she put her hands to the wheels of the chair. She closed her eyes, and turned the wheels of her fate.

III

What it was that made him pause at the corner of the house and look back at her was mere conjecture. He had had no suspicion, no understanding of her young and raw despair; he just saw her chair moving, and was surprised. And then the thing

flashed upon him. Deliberately she was propelling herself to the end of the wooden staging where the water lay deep.

He did not utter a word. He felt the crazy structure quiver as he ran. He saw her hands turning more fiercely at the wheels as though she had heard him behind her, and was wild to elude a rescue. She was at the edge. The front wheels were over, and the machine in the act of tilting when he got his hands to it.

He dragged it back. He saw her two hands leave the wheels, clutch each other, and then cover her face.

She cried out with a strange, smothered voice:

"O, let go, let go. It's damnable of you. I can't even kill myself."

He stood quite still for a moment, his two big hands on the handle of the chair. He was looking at her two hands. He too was on the edge of reality.

He spoke.

"I—understand—now."

Her head seemed to twist from side to side on the pillow. She flung her hands aside and let them hang over the wheels.

"Damn you—and your kindness. I've had—too—much kindness. It kills one. One just lies and rots. Yes—I wanted to die. And you say—you understand—!"

"Perhaps."

"O, rot! If you understood—you'd push me over the edge."

All the colour seemed to have gone from his face. It had a starkness. The bell was ringing again, and he did not hear it. He bent over her from behind, and his hands clasped her face.

"Should I? When—I love you?"

She put up her hands and tried to push his away. Her despair was even more naked and unashamed.

"O, don't talk such rot to me. It makes it worse. It's all so impossible, so filthy——"

"Rachel——"

"O, can't you understand——? I'm not cold. I'm alive. I've faced things out. I'm honest. I'm a live coal that can't burn. I want to be put out. And you say——"

He held her head in his hands.

"I'm not cold—either, Rachel."

"O, my God! Push me over. Yes, if you love me like that,

push me over. It's best; it's the only thing; the only decent thing. You see—I know——”

Her wide eyes implored him. They were like the eyes of an animal in pain.

“Do it for me. You couldn't do anything more dear—and wonderful and brave. O, my dear, have pity.”

She looked at him steadily for some seconds, and then suddenly she closed her eyes and began to weep. Her hands hung over the wheels. She was alive on the bed of her destiny—and helpless. He wanted her to live. She would be sacrificed to his belief that one should go on living, and loving and being loved. He was a man; he didn't know; he didn't understand.

And like a pathetic, frustrated child, she whimpered to him.

“Yes, I shall die—I shall die somehow. You'll see. O, why did you come back?”

IV

A voice interrupted them, a fat and rather embarrassed voice.

“Excuse me—but could I have some petrol?”

“Petrol? Of course.”

Bonthorn faced about. He saw a little walrus-headed man in grey flannel trousers, the collar of a tennis shirt flopping over the collar of a blue coat. The little man's prominent eyes were apologetic.

“Sorry to trouble you, but I've run out of juice.”

Bonthorn's body was a screen concealing Rachel. He smiled at John Citizen who—so far as the flesh was concerned—looked so little lacking in juice.

“Right. I'll come round to the front.”

“Thanks. Sorry to trouble you.”

He disappeared, and again Bonthorn bent over Rachel. She was lying with her eyes shut, and the lashes were wet.

“I am going to take you with me.”

She said nothing. She had been frustrated, and her cry of despair had been uttered, but her silence was not the silence of surrender. Her very helplessness protested, and as he drew her wheeled chair over the planking of the gallery he was made to realize her silence and to examine it. For this attempt of hers to end life had been no hysterical display. She was most dread-

fully in earnest. And the interfering and tender hands of the lover had provoked in her a more resentful despair.

And perhaps that had both surprised and shocked him, both as man and lover. The self-complacency of sex! And discovering that element of the old Adam in him, he was in a hurry to cast it out. Was his vanity to be involved because she—poor child—was desperate?

And then he heard her speaking.

"Mr. Bonthorn, don't take me round to the front."

He paused. How strange that she could cling to that formal prefix when both of them were so overwrought! And yet it was understandable. She was trying to cover her nakedness, to recover her self-control, and formalism might help.

"I don't want to see people just now."

He understood.

"Where would you like to be?"

"Over there, on the grass, where we dry the clothes."

It was the little piece of grass where he had seen her leaping with those other young things, and as he turned aside and placed her chair in the centre of it, he saw her yesterday contrasted with her to-day. He stood hesitant. Was she to be trusted? And he was looking about for something with which to wedge the wheels of her chair.

Instantly she discovered his mistrust.

"No, you needn't do that. I won't try——"

"You promise?"

"I promise."

He reached for one of her hands.

"That's good enough. I'm not a mere sentimental fool. We're on the edge of things together."

She looked at him tragically.

"I don't think you could understand—without being me."

"Couldn't I? But I might try to. Why not give me a chance?"

Her fingers pressed his.

"O, it might be too bitter—— But you'll want the key of the pump. It will be hanging on a nail just inside the front door."

He raised her hand, kissed it, and left her, and she lay looking at her hand. She placed it against her cheek.

O, if she could dare to live!

The little walrus-headed man was waiting patiently with an empty petrol can. He explained that he had had to leave his car a hundred yards up the road.

"Damned silly—to run out of juice."

Bonthorn found that the front door of the Mill House had been locked, but he managed to scramble in at an open window and possess himself of the key. He explained the situation to John Citizen.

"They have gone out for the evening. They forgot to leave the key with us. How much petrol do you want?"

"A couple of gallons."

They made the discovery that neither of them knew how to operate the pump. Bonthorn looked fierce.

"I'll go and ask Miss Buck. She'll know. She had a bad accident a few months ago. That's why——"

He went. He returned not merely with the information, but with Rachel and her chair. To all appearances she had recovered her self-control. She lay beside the red pump and directed him. The can was filled.

"How much?"

It was Rachel who gave the price. The little man paid, nodded his round head at them, said he was much obliged and trotted off with the can.

Bonthorn locked up the pump, and handed the key and the money to Rachel.

"Like to go back to that other place?"

She lay looking at the sky.

"No, not now. Put me by the chestnut tree."

He wheeled her into the shadow of the tree. He was aware of her beseeching eyes. She put out a hand.

"You won't tell?"

"Your mother?"

"Yes—promise—promise."

"I promise."

Chapter Twenty-five

I

THE dusk seemed to envelop them as though the tree had let down a dark and diaphanous curtain, and out of the dusk her voice came to him as he stood leaning against the trunk of the tree. She was both very near, and very far away.

"O, please don't talk sentimental rot. It hurts. It's so impossible."

For, actually, he had asked her to marry him. He had suggested taking her to that little white house and making a new life for her there. He was the urgent, dear idealist still regarding her as a plant with a broken stem, and proposing to tie her to the green stake of his compassion.

"You don't realize things. No, please don't touch me."

Her despair went in search of wounds. She wanted to slash at all the conventions with which life clothed itself, to rend the seams of the garment of sentiment. She was both reckless and resolutely calm. He was not facing the facts. He was treating her as a kind of beautiful abstraction; he asked to see her all dressed up in white chiffon, the dear, desired, devoted martyr, and she was determined that he should see her naked.

She said—"Let's be honest. Your woman would give notice in a week, and you would not find it easy to get another. You don't seem to realize how helpless I am, and what my helplessness means to other people. Mother has to put up with it—just because she is my mother."

He seemed part of the trunk of the tree, and his silence humoured her, and she did not ask to be humoured.

"Besides—you'd begin to be sick of me. O, yes, you would. Men can't put up with things as women can. O, let's be real. I don't want to pretend. One dies of trying to pretend, and I have to pretend with mother. It's all I can do. You see, a man can't know how a woman feels about certain things——"

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. Or, you wouldn't have suggested taking charge of me. It was dear of you—but—O—so—stupid. And if I had let myself go—— You see—I don't want to live. And you think that's horrible and cowardly."

He did not answer her at once.

"But if I understand?"

"You can't understand. You would have to be me for a month to understand how life hurts me. Because life's worse than a farce if you can't live it. O, yes it is, at my age. If I were very old—I might just lie and rot, but I'm young; I want to do things, and I want to be things. And I'm just a corpse."

He made a movement towards her, but her quick voice restrained him.

"No, no—that's not fair. You mustn't try to get at me in that way. Not—by touching. O, that may sound so crude to you, but it isn't really. You see—we are bodies—more body than soul—I think, and you are trying to persuade me that a soul can live and be happy inside a wretched, broken, useless body. It can't, it can't. O, don't try and pretend."

He stood very still. It was as though her young and ruthless realism was crucifying his humanity. She was nailing his idealism to the trunk of that tree.

She had to be answered.

"I do believe—that it would be possible."

Her hands moved restlessly.

"Must I go on explaining? You are making me strip myself."

"Rachel!"

"Listen. I have to be washed and dressed and fed like a small child. Hour after hour and day after day, I have to be fussed over. I have to lie and accept, hating myself, loathing myself. There is only one person in the world whom I can bear near me, to do all these things for me. She does them—not because she's an angel, but because she's a woman and my mother. And yet—you can't understand——"

He watched the lights of a car sending a glare towards them along the road. The darkness was dispersed for a few seconds. He could see her lying there in her chair, and his own face was

revealed. The tree was like some lighted tent, and then everything was dark again.

"Perhaps I am beginning to understand."

"A little. But not everything."

"My limitations? Yes, is it that I have lived so much with impersonal things? And life can be so ruthlessly personal. But tell me, Rachel, is there anything that could make you want to live?"

She seemed to draw a deep breath. He was being real with her now.

"Yes, to be able to live—even a little."

"Just—how?"

"To walk—even with two sticks. To be able to move myself, to get things for myself, and not only for myself."

He looked down at her in the darkness.

"There is more soul in your body, dear, than you think. And you'll have to go on living——"

He was aware of her dim hands hanging.

"Yes—I know. That's fate—somehow. I tried to hang myself, and you came and cut the rope. She—wants me to go on living. Yes, I know that—— She couldn't conceive—— I suppose it would be a brutal thing."

"Yes."

"I'm her baby so to speak, and babies don't commit suicide, do they——? No—I can't call you Nicholas or Nick. What shall I call you?"

He was conscious of keeping himself pressed against the tree.

"Why not—just—man?"

"Man!"

She lay musing.

"Man. Then—help me—man. I can't die—and I can't live. O, try and help me—without hurting or provoking——"

And suddenly he knelt down and put his hands on the edge of her chair.

"No, don't be afraid. I won't touch, unless you ask me to. I've begun to understand. We need not pretend together any more, need we?—or if we are pretending we shall know that it's because of someone else. But—I love you, and when one is loved one is not alone."

She lay and looked at him in the darkness. She put out a hand and touched his face.

"Dear man—stay with me till they come back. I'm always alone with myself now. I did not know what being alone meant until——"

"Yes—I think I know."

There was a long silence between them. Bonthorn had brought one of the terrace chairs, and he sat astride it, watching the road. Certain words of hers possessed him. "To walk—even with two sticks." How little it was to ask, and being denied it he had a feeling that she would die, just burn herself up and flicker out for lack of the will to live. And sitting there in the darkness beside him he knew that he loved the reality of Rachel as he would never have loved the sweet and sentimental creature of his own creating. Her very despair was part of his flesh. She wanted to die because living could be too bitter. This was reality.

He sat on beside her, with his hand resting on hers, and presently the lights of another car approached, but he did not withdraw his hand. The car slowed up. It was Mrs. Binnie returning from *Journey's End* with Rhoda and Fred Tanrock.

He felt her fingers clasp his.

"Mother."

He stood up with the lights of the car upon him. He heard Mrs. Binnie's voice.

"Why, it's Mr. Bonthorn."

He went forward to meet them.

"Yes, we sold some petrol, and after that we sat and talked."

"I'm so glad. It seemed so selfish of me, Mr. Bonthorn."

She fluttered past him towards her younger daughter. A part of the tree was lit up brilliantly by the car's lights, but Rachel was in the shadow. Bonthorn heard Rachel's voice, bright and brave and welcoming.

"Yes—I'm quite all right, dear. How did you enjoy yourself?"

He understood Mrs. Binnie to say that she had enjoyed herself at the cost of two wet handkerchiefs, her own and Rhoda's. Yes, it had been lovely, but so tragic, so sad. And Bonthorn felt moved to slip silently away, like a big moth passing across the glare of the car's lights. Tragedy! While Mrs. Binnie had been

weeping over those tragic happenings on a screen, he had been involved in Rachel's tragedy, the imminence of her Journey's End.

He walked slowly up the dark lane, and the urgent reality of her anguish walked with him, for she was flesh and blood, no sublimated piece of sex and sentiment, the creation of a man's dream-spinning soul. She was Journey's End, as tragic and as real and as ruthlessly inevitable.

"If I could walk—even with two sticks." Yes, that was the problem. Nothing in his garden had ever propounded such a problem to him as this girl who could neither live nor die.

II

He went to see the one man who could tell him whether there was any hope for Rachel, Carver of Lignor, and he caught Dr. Carver walking in his walled garden at the back of the old red house in Southgate Street. Dr. Carver grew dahlias and chrysanthemums of an immense size and splendour, and Bonthorn was led gently into the doctor's garden.

"About yourself, is it? You look fit enough."

"No, not about myself."

"That's all right. Just have a look at these new fellows. There's a thing called Atalanta——"

But Bonthorn was not at all interested in Dr. Carver's dahlias, though the name of Atalanta was strangely significant. Almost, there was an arrogance and a grossness about these succulent sheaves with their brilliant blobs of colour, and Bonthorn's mood was urgent. He was introduced to Atalanta, paid discreet homage to her, and then came to the point.

"It's about Rachel Buck. I want you to tell me whether you consider——"

He was aware of the abruptness of Carver's glance, a stare that said—"Hallo—a private patient of mine! What business is it of yours? You're not a relation," and Bonthorn made haste to parry that glance.

"O, you want my authority? Well, I have asked her to marry me, and of course—— Yes, that's the situation. I want to know whether there is any hope."

Dr. Carver forgot about his dahlias. Bonthorn had discon-

certed him, and very considerably so. The unexpectedness of this new world! A man like Bonthorn proposing to marry a girl from a tea-shop, a poor paralyzed thing, even though she was the daughter of Mrs. Binnie. And that one blue eye of Bonthorn's covering him like the mouth of a pistol!

Almost, Dr. Carver prevaricated. Usually a crisp and decisive person, he was guilty of hesitations, fumbings. He looked annoyed, and offered Bonthorn a cigarette.

"That's rather a poser, my dear chap. And coming from you—— Well, the fact is——"

Bonthorn accepted a cigarette.

"I quite understand—the difficulties."

"But—that's just it, Bonthorn. I don't think you do. What I mean is, well—to be quite frank—the case has been a bit of a puzzle; not according to plan."

Bonthorn smiled at him gently. Carver the man and Carver the professional authority were jostling each other.

"Not a text-book case?"

"No."

"But doesn't that happen very often?—though you doctors can't blurt it out. Life catches us guessing. As a biologist—I know that. The thing your microscope shows you and the nice picture in the text-book don't always tally. So, you can be candid."

Dr. Carver was candid. He explained that the history of the case, the signs and symptoms, had indicated a certain lesion, but that the X-ray examination had clouded instead of clearing the issue. "It did not show us what we expected to see." And his explanation, a little confused and almost apologetic, seemed to partake of the obscurity of the condition. "We can't work miracles, you know. And then there was the question of active interference, and after considering it carefully, we turned it down. Because—there was an alternative explanation, just a glimmer of hope. And if it happened to be a case of hæmorrhage into the spinal canal and of pressure——"

He threw away the stump of a cigarette and lit another.

"Fact is, Bonthorn, some of us are a little shy—these days—of the bright young men with knives. O, yes, damned efficient, but the results aren't always happy. Yes, you take me."

Bonthorn nodded.

"So—there is hope?"

"Did I say so?"

"You hinted at it."

"Well, look here, it's so damned shadowy that somehow I hadn't the heart to suggest it to them."

"You waited."

"Exactly. And I think—if you had been in my shoes you would have done just the same. I made sure that she was getting all the treatment that could help her, should there be a chance——"

Bonthorn stood thinking, his blue eye set in a stare.

"Yes—I understand. But there is the psychology of the case, the human factor—— I happen to know. You see the child is dying just because she hasn't any hope. I don't say that we should dangle a rope—but can't we do—something active?"

Carver looked at him.

"How?"

"Give her change. Supposing we had another opinion? Supposing you sent her to London for a month? I'll foot the bill. Don't think me an interfering devil—but I'm in this—as a man."

Carver nodded. His voice was a little gruff.

"That's all right. I see what you mean. A change of environment does help. I'm quite ready——"

Bonthorn smiled at him.

"That's what I wanted from you, what I expected from you, and I've got it. I'm grateful. Give me the name of the best man in town, and a letter. Will you? Or perhaps you would prefer——?"

Carver threw the stump of the second cigarette into the deeps of his precious dahlia border.

"O, yes, that's all right, Bonthorn. I'm not a professional prig. I'm ready to help in any way. Besides, it will give the mother a little rest. She's a damned little old sport."

"She is."

III

Carver sent Bonthorn to Sir Magnus Orme, and when Sir Magnus had read Dr. Carver's letter and examined the photographs, he addressed himself to Bonthorn as though Bonthorn was part of the problem.

"Are you a relative?"

"No . . . But I'm engaged to Miss Buck."

"I see."

The fresh-coloured old gentleman with the white head and the airs of an ambassador had a shrewd and meticulous eye. He belonged very much to the old school; he did not believe in letting the public too intimately behind the screen, and to relatives he was apt to appear as the mysterious autocrat, for, being wise as to how much and how little he knew, and as to how much the world thought it knew, he believed that the priest abdicated his power when he dispensed with mystery. He looked Bonthorn through and over; he appraised him.

He said: "I have every confidence in Dr. Carver," and paused. Bonthorn smiled at him.

"So have I."

That put them into harmony, and when Bonthorn went on to explain the humanities, and to touch simply and gently upon youth's tragedy, the old autocrat became man.

"Very well. Bring her up here—yes, the sooner the better. I'll recommend you a nursing-home. Or—I can arrange it for you."

"If you would."

"I should prefer to examine her there."

The persuading of Rachel was an easy matter. She was wild to go. Something was about to happen, and in this season of her despair she was ready to welcome the most trivial of happenings, new faces, any tremor of change. How much she hoped was doubtful, but it was Bonthorn's adventure as well as hers. Moreover, they had been obliged to let Mrs. Binnie into the secret, for pure altruism is not wholly convincing, and if Bonthorn was to sign cheques he should be allowed an air of authority.

Mrs. Binnie had exclaimed: "Well, really— isn't it wonderful," and with very bright eyes had expected Bonthorn to kiss her, and Bonthorn had kissed her, but behind her lover's back Rachel had spoken gently to her mother.

"I don't want it known. People would only laugh. It is very dear of him to do this for me."

Robinia could not see the world laughing at Bonthorn. Her attitude was childlike. In spite of social incongruities it seemed

to her most natural that Bonthorn should love Rachel, for Rachel had always been lovable, and to Mrs. Binnie she was far more lovable now as the dark-eyed and tragic martyr.

"Well, we won't say anything about it."

"You see, it's so hopeless. Even if I were to——"

Mrs. Binnie looked wise.

"I'll never give up hoping. I don't think Mr. Bonthorn's given up hoping. He wouldn't be worrying you to go up to London if he didn't hope. He's not an ordinary man, my dear."

"There's no other man like him."

So, the Lignor ambulance was chartered, and Rachel was driven up to London, and Mrs. Binnie travelled with her. Mrs. Binnie had heard terrible things about nursing-homes, but when she had seen and spoken to the very great lady who was responsible for No. 7 Seymour Square Mrs. Binnie was reassured.

She was introduced to Rachel's nurse, a pale and quiet girl with kind eyes.

"I know you'll be good to her, my dear."

Mrs. Binnie wept a little all to herself in the empty ambulance, but her distress had a happy edge to it. People were so kind, and she had a feeling that life was going to be a little less difficult. After all, things couldn't always go wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I

ROBINIA dared to hope, for a naïve optimism had sustained this sanguine, scurrying little creature through years of domestic disaster. September was giving the year a last gentle and golden week; the world upon wheels provided the Mill House with a profit, while slackening its exactions, and the dark-browed Rhoda showed a forceful kindness.

"Mother, you'll breakfast in bed."

"But, my dear, really——"

"Yes, you will. Good opportunity. Take it."

So, in humouring and being humoured Mrs. Binnie did take her breakfast in bed, with the window wide open, and the road and the river and the green slopes of Stella Lacey visible to her. She allowed herself to relax, though her relaxation lacked a complete and sensuous surrender. She sat propped against her pillows with an air of gentle correctness, as though this idling in bed was not quite in order, and it behoved her not to be caught napping. Possibly, this peace upon earth appeared fallacious, and she could not quite rid herself of the feeling that worry was waiting for her outside the door, and that if she dozed off, it would poke its head in and mock her.

"Silly old woman. Thought you'd got rid of me, did you? Not likely."

But Mrs. Binnie did dare to hope that her scurrings and her scufflings had wrung from life some result, some harmony, a little perch of permanence. And why should she not hope? The Mill House seemed to be standing upon solid feet. Rhoda, poor dear, appeared less fractious, and after all, Rhoda's future was provided for. Moreover, Mrs. Binnie had received a cheerful and affectionate letter from Rachel, and though nothing very definite had transpired, Rachel seemed ready to hope. Sir Magnus Orme was watching the case, yes, he had examined her most carefully;

she had been X-rayed. Sir Magnus was writing to Dr. Carver. And then, of course, there was Mr. Bonthorn, and to Mrs. Binnie Bonthorn was both mysterious and magnificent, a sort of Colossus of Rhodes dumped down in Sussex. She was just a little in awe of Nicholas Bonthorn, but just as a child might be a little in awe of him. He was such a person, somehow so vivid and reassuring.

Mrs. Binnie mused.

"Of course, they may never be able to get married. Invalids shouldn't marry. I'm sure Rachel would feel like that about it. But, after all, I've got a home for her here. I can get one of Annie's girls when Rhoda goes. I've built up a nice little business, yes—I have really, and we can feel ourselves independent. I don't want to have to sponge on anybody, even on a dear fine man like Mr. Bonthorn. I let him pay for the nursing-home, but I shouldn't like him to go on paying. No, really."

And contemplating that quiet, September landscape, Mrs. Binnie did allow herself to think that life had played its worst tricks upon her. The road was there; it would always be there bringing custom to her door. That custom should increase. She was a little person of property. She felt innocently and justifiably proud.

II

A Friday morning.

Rhoda had come in to collect her mother's breakfast tray, and her mother had said to her: "I do feel so much better for the rest. I'll get up as usual on Sunday morning."

Mrs. Binnie lay and looked out of the window. The day was young, and the road in a quiet mood with an occasional car swinging over the humped back of the bridge. Mrs. Binnie could see the bridge, and the white posts and rails where the ramp of the road rose above the piece of swampy ground beyond. Willow-herb and purple loosestrife were still in bloom amid the flags and sedges. The trees of Stella Lacey stood embattled on the changeless hills. But for the black road the landscape might have been the landscape of Queen Bess or the Benedictines, peculiarly permanent and reassuring.

But something was happening down there under the very eyes of the Mill House. Mrs. Binnie became aware of two young men

in grey flannel trousers and brown jackets stretching a measuring tape across the bridge. They spoke to each other: "How's that? Are you flush with the wall?" "Yes." "Eighteen six."—"Yes, she narrows a bit in the centre." One of the young men produced a note-book, and using the flat of the parapet as a table, jotted down figures, while his assistant drew in the tape.

Mrs. Binnie was puzzled, vaguely disquieted. She watched the two young men remove themselves from the bridge, and proceed to stretch the tape across the road immediately in front of the Mill House. The younger of the two squatted for a moment on one of the white posts while he held the end of the measure against the ground.

"Right. Got it."

The man on the farther side came across and disappeared from view, and Mrs. Binnie heard their voices below.

"Regular bottle-neck."

"Yes, that old tree will have to go."

Mrs. Binnie got quickly out of bed and dressed herself as though her old enemy was waiting on the threshold and might burst in and catch her naked. She was greatly disquieted. What were those two young men doing with their wretched tapes? And suggesting that a tree would have to come down? Not her tree—surely?

Rhoda was in the kitchen, and Mrs. Binnie did not call her daughter, but went out to see whether the two young men were still there. They were very much there, and in the act of measuring the width of that paved space between the Mill House and the posts and chains. One of the twain, in the act of bending, showed to Robinia the seat of a tight pair of grey flannel trousers.

She exclaimed. She stood there rather like a very small and combative hen.

"What are you doing, measuring my terrace? It's private property, you know. Did you ask permission?"

No, the young men had not asked permission. The elder of the two sat down on one of Mrs. Binnie's chairs, and opened his note-book on one of her tables. He was a rather surly and laconic young man, and he was in a hurry. He scribbled some figures in his book, and addressed Mrs. Binnie, but without looking at her.

"New bridge coming here. Got to widen the road for it—too."

Mrs. Binnie was conscious of a little sinking feeling.

"A new bridge! I hadn't heard anything——"

The young man went on scribbling.

"O, you'll hear about it, all right. I'm afraid we've got to take in your frontage."

"My frontage?"

"Yes—all this paved place. The tree will have to come down. Of course—you'll be compensated."

But Mrs. Binnie had fled into the tea-room, and was calling for her daughter, and her small face had a pinched look.

"Rhoda—Rhoda—there are some men measuring here. They say they are going to take away our terrace."

Rhoda emerged. She looked at her mother, and went out straightway to interview those two young autocrats. She was in one of her dark moods, and she belonged to a generation that believed in candour.

"Hallo, what's the wheeze?"

The young man at the table observed her. He was a little less abrupt to Rhoda than he had been to a superfluous old woman. Rhoda had looks.

"Afraid I'm using one of your tables."

"No charge for manners."

The young man became very polite and sarcastic.

"We are surveying the bridge and its approaches. O, yes, our authority is all right. Yes, a new bridge to carry the traffic. Afraid we shall have to bring our new ramp within a couple of yards of your windows. No use my apologizing. Progress, you know."

Rhoda, black browed, glanced at the open doorway. She divined her mother within, listening.

"That's all very bright and nice, but you can't come and——"

The young man got up.

"O, yes, we can. Besides, we're not responsible. We're just sent to survey things and report. Sorry—but transport——"

Rhoda looked black.

"You've got plenty of room over there."

"Where?"

"On the other side."

"Nothing doing. Soft ground. Cost too much to make it carry a road. The obvious thing is to take what's solid. Can't help these things, you know, in these days. Can't obstruct the Ministry of Transport."

Rhoda nodded her head.

"O, pills—you could do it if you wanted to. Got a bit swelled over your authority, my lad. Damn it, we get a little business built up here, and you come and cut its face off."

"You'll be compensated."

"O, compensated! With cars cutting past within two yards of our windows. Why—this bit of ground and the tree are—it—so far as we are concerned. It's a bloody wash-out."

The young man grew heated. He put his note-book away.

"Well, no use losing your hair. You can't expect main traffic to be held up by a tea-shop."

Rhoda tightened her lips.

"No—I suppose not. And when do you expect this delightful——?"

"O—some time this winter. There was a pretty bad smash up here a few weeks ago, wasn't there? People roasted. But I don't suppose that seems so important to you——"

"As you feel."

She turned her back on them, re-entered the house, and closed the door. She saw her mother sitting on a chair, and her mother's face had a queer and vacant expression. The lips trembled. She seemed to be trying to ask Rhoda a question, and the words would not shape themselves.

"Is it true, Rho?"

"Afraid so."

"They're going to leave us right on the edge of the road—with nothing? After all we've done, just when we've got going?"

And Rhoda, instead of letting her tongue loose, went and kissed her mother on the forehead, and spoke with curious quietness.

"O, they're just pups. We may be able to do something about it. I'll go and see Fred. He knows the surveyor up at Lignor."

She patted her mother's limp arm.

"Just—pups."

III

Bonthorn, with a bagging-hook and a crooked hazel stick, was cutting the rough grass at the bottom of the holly hedge when Mrs. Binnie appeared in the lane. Bonthorn did not hear her, and she stood a moment to watch the flick-flick of his wrist and the glint of the sickle. Mr. Bonthorn was wearing no collar, and his throat and arms, brown as berries, showed the strong lines of sinew and muscle. Nor did it seem strange to Mrs. Binnie that Mr. Bonthorn should be using a sickle.

"O, Mr. Bonthorn, you'll excuse me, won't you?"

She saw him turn and straighten. A hand went to his old hat. His blue eye observed her.

"What's the matter?"

For, it was obvious from Mrs. Binnie's face that something was the matter, and Bonthorn thought that Mrs. Binnie had had bad news of Rachel. She was standing just where a flicker of light and of shadow from the beech tree played across her small face and figure.

"No, it's not about Rachel. That's one mercy. But I've just had terrible news. They are going to take all my frontage away."

For a moment Bonthorn looked at her as though someone had threatened to remove a portion of her small person.

"Frontage?"

"Yes—they're going to widen the bridge and cut down the chestnut tree, and take away all the ground where we have our tables."

"Who? How do you know?"

"There've been some young men measuring everything. Really, it does seem hard, Mr. Bonthorn. We're going to have the road right up against our windows. Everything's ruined. It makes you wonder what's going to happen next; it does—really. And I was having breakfast in bed, this morning, and just telling myself that things seemed to be going right."

She seemed part of the flicker of light and shadow, and Bonthorn felt himself part of her trouble.

"It's damnable. But are you sure?"

"The young men said so. But I haven't been warned."

"The official mind doesn't work in that way. It just takes a ruler and a pencil and a map. But surely——"

"I wondered if you could do anything, Mr. Bonthorn."

"I?"

He smiled at his own whimsical, fierce self. In the new world he was of no more account than a tree or an old piece of red wall, and he knew it.

He said: "You see, they call this progress. If you happen to be in the way—— But I might be able to find out. You may be able to appeal, but it's not much use appealing against Juggernaut. Besides——"

He was aware of her little worried face.

"Besides—we're so smothered under legislation that the ordinary man who has a job to do—can't know where he stands. But I'll try and find out."

She looked up at him like a child.

"Rhoda's gone up to see Fred. He knows the surveyor. I do think they might have warned me—I do—really. It's just as though one was a heap of stones, Mr. Bonthorn, and not a human being."

His voice was very gentle.

"Exactly. It may be that it's because there are too many human beings in the world that things have to happen in this way. Hardly time to count heads, much less to consider little people like you and me. But I'll go up to Lignor."

Yet, in crossing that very bridge on the way to Lignor he realized the inevitableness of the disaster. The old grey parapets clasped and constricted the new haste; the bridge was obsolete, and exasperating to a world in a hurry, a world that had lost the art of lingering and looking. Mrs. Binnie, like a trusting little bird, had built her nest too near the road, while proposing to pick up her crumbs from that same road. And yet one should have been able to forecast the replacement of that almost mediæval structure by something conceived in reinforced concrete.

Lignor possessed an urban district council, and Bonthorn happened to know the clerk to the council, a tired but efficient little man with dry and faded blue eyes. Mr. Wendover gave Bonthorn five minutes, but he talked to him standing, as though sitting down might prove too official and dilatory.

"The bridge at Monks Lacey? Widening? We don't know anything about it. Well, you need not look surprised. The road's an A road. The Assyrians are responsible."

That was one of Mr. Wendover's little jests. He referred to centralized officialdom as Assyria.

"We're just sheep. But, as a matter of fact, I know that your particular bridge has been under condemnation. O, yes, they'll just rub it out, or order it to be rubbed out. Do anything? No, you can't do anything. Making a fuss would be waste of money. We are hopelessly mixed up in the thing called progress, yes, just as though we had got involved in the wheels of a traction engine."

"It's rather hard on the old lady."

"I agree. She's just one of the victims, a fly on the wheel. Of course, she will get compensation."

"Quite so," said Bonthorn, "enough to pay for a tombstone. I know all this sort of thing has to happen, but I sometimes wonder whether it need happen so brutally."

"Brutally?"

"Well—officially, anonymously—much the same thing—to my mind."

He returned to the Mill House, and tried to soften the apparent inevitableness of the event to Mrs. Binnie. He found that Rhoda had preceded him, and that young Tanrock had been concealing information that had come to him from trade sources. He had not wanted to worry the old lady. The transformation of the bridge at Monks Lacey was but a trifle in a comprehensive scheme for modernizing the Lignor-London road. Corners were to be cut, trees felled and narrow stretches widened. One village, not five miles away, was to see a dozen of its houses demolished.

Mrs. Binnie sat with her hands lying in her lap.

"Well—I suppose they can't consider us. But it does seem rather hard. We'll have to manage somehow."

She looked up at Bonthorn.

"But I don't want Rachel to know. It might worry her—just when we don't want her worried. Besides—if Rachel gets well, that's what matters most, doesn't it, Mr. Bonthorn? But this has taken the heart out of me, somehow, it has—really. I've tried and I've tried, and it's the things over which you have no con-

trol which seem to beat you. But it's no use grouching, is it? I'll have to manage somehow."

IV

Meanwhile, No. 7 Seymour Square was gathering the impression that Rachel would not get well, or rather—that she would remain as she was, youth in a half-paralyzed body. She herself was absorbing that same impression. It looked out at her from Sir Magnus Orme's wise old eyes. He was gentle, rather formal, paternally reticent. She divined it in the kindness of the nurses, and in the quiet sympathy of the matron. They were preparing to console her, before letting the truth be known. Almost she could hear them taking counsel together outside her door.

For a while she had felt the window of life wide open, but now a careful and considerate hand seemed to be slowly lowering a blind. She lay and mused. She listened to the sound of the traffic, the triumphant and urgent trumpeting of the new world. Like some horned beast it had gored her and tossed her aside.

Something in her lay still and consented. Was the world going mad? Were there no quiet places left in which a wounded creature could lie hidden and at peace, unprovoked by this rushing hither and thither?

Her attitude to things had changed. No longer did she feel violent towards herself. That spasm had passed.

She might die, but she would drop like a leaf. And did it matter? Why should it matter? Life was broken in her.

Bonthorn came up to see her, and his very quietness suggested that he had been worried by those others.

"No change. Quite hopeless I'm afraid. There was just a chance. If there had been a flicker, any sign of returning power—we should have been justified in hoping. No, there's nothing."

She put out a hand to her lover. She spoke to him appealingly, and without a trace of petulance.

"Would you feel—hurt—if I asked to go home?"

He held her hand.

"You want to go home. That's sufficient."

She closed her eyes.

"I'm not going to get any better. They haven't dared to tell me yet, but I know."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I

WHEN Mrs. Binnie heard the news she climbed the narrow, wooden stairs to the attic that had been Rachel's bedroom in the days before her accident. For Mrs. Binnie wanted to be alone, and she stood in the recess of the dormer window, and since the afternoon sunlight was pouring in, she shaded her face with her hand. She did not weep, even though her worries had reached saturation point, and this sudden chill should have brought down dew.

It occurred to her that she would have to buy new bed linen, for Rachel's illness had worn out sheets that had never been of first quality. And there were no sales on, and prices seemed preposterous. But what a thing to think of! She gave a little, sorrowful sniff, and rubbed her eyes gently, and made herself look out of the window as though trees and water and green grass were consoling realities.

She thought: "Yes—I shall have to carry on. As long as she lives, poor darling, I shall have the nursing of her. She and poor Mr. Bonthorn will never be man and wife."

Her small face puckered itself. She was remembering the imminent operations upon the bridge, and that the activities of the road-makers and the bridge-builders would be in action just outside the window of that little room on the ground floor. And the tree was to be felled.

"What—am—I to do about it?"

It occurred to her that she might put up a bed in the kitchen, for the kitchen window did not look out upon the road. Yes—that was both possible and practical, and the kitchen fire would make for economy. Her preoccupations traversed the winter and considered the following spring. She would have to find a place for her tea-tables, and attempt the creating of a new atmosphere,

for she and Rachel had to live and the world on wheels be persuaded to sustain them with its shillings.

Yet, out of that autumn landscape a vision was vouchsafed her. She saw the burning beech trees, and particularly that vast tree close to Mr. Bonthorn's cottage, and the green of the oaks, and the incipient pallor of the poplars and the willows. A splendid scene, with the still water reflecting the golds and the blues of the foliage and sky, and if her vision was of no great splendour, but a little, simple, workaday glimpse of her world's possibilities, it was none the less courageous. She withdrew her hand, and leaning out, looked down at that green space and piece of rough garden behind the Mill House and dipping gently to the river. Why, of course! How was it that it had not occurred to her before? If the Official World had cut off her frontage, it had left her a space at the back of the house. She could turn all that ground into a parking-place and garden; transfer the paving stones and the chairs and tables and the yellow umbrellas. She could put up a board:

"Pull in here. Have tea by the river."

Mrs. Binnie did not go to church. She had no time to go to church, but she was one of those simple souls to whom the angel of the Lord appeared, and she needed her angel. She went down on her knees in that attic and prayed. She came down from her high place with a small face that was somehow transfigured.

She found Rhoda sweeping the tea-room.

"My dear, I have just had an idea. We shall have to turn things the other way round; that's all."

Rhoda paused to look at her mother, for to Rhoda her mother was an eternal enigma, a little creature who would have stood at the foot of the Cross with a face of wet ecstasy.

"What's the idea?"

"Why, the back will have to be the front."

Rhoda waited for further illumination. She was pregnant with a problem of her own, and a little inclined to brood upon it.

"We just make the back the front. Silly of me not to think of it before, wasn't it? Besides, it will be so much nicer by the river. A tea-garden by the river."

Rhoda leaned upon her broom.

"You mean—you are going to start all over again?"

Robinia's eyes were like the bright little eyes of a dog.

"I'll have a door cut through that wall, and two windows. Yes, to look out on the river instead of on the road. And I'll have a nice garden made. People will come in off the road, and get such a surprise. And there will be room for cars to park."

Rhoda's harsh mood softened. If no angel ever appeared to her and her generation, at least her mother was an amazing little person, and as unexpected as Balaam's ass.

She said: "Well, you've got some stuff in you, mater. You don't chuck your hand in."

And Mrs. Binnie gave a little, twittering laugh.

But when Bonthorn came down to tell her that he had made arrangements for the Lignor ambulance to bring Rachel back to Monks Lacey, she was full of her new inspiration, and took him out with her to the ground beside the river. She explained her plan. She was ready to hail him as her expert and her prophet.

"I could make quite a lovely place here, couldn't I, Mr. Bonthorn? I'd like to have a terrace, and flower-beds, and a per-gola. I could use up the stones from the other side. And perhaps you could draw me a plan."

If to him she appeared as the Mother of Man, he was ready to be the Beloved Disciple.

"I think I could. But what about the labour?"

"I could get a strong lad in. Besides, the winter's our quiet time, Mr. Bonthorn. I used to love doing a bit of gardening."

"You—yourself?"

"Well—why not?"

He considered her, and her half-acre, and possible transfigurations.

"Yes—I'll plan it for you. And I can give you all the plants. I might be able to put in a few hours myself. I'd like to."

"Oh—I couldn't expect you to do that."

"Couldn't you?"

His smile was whimsical.

"No, not just rough work like that, Mr. Bonthorn. No, not really, when you're quite famous."

He laughed.

"I'd find it famous fun."

II

Meanwhile, the official mind had dealt with Robinia and the subtractions that were to be made from her property. It had notified her of the annexation of her strip of frontage, treating the affair as a *fait accompli*. She would receive compensation, but the sum to be paid her was not stated, nor when it was to be paid. There would be a valuation—by the official world at the official world's convenience. Moreover, the communication she received somewhat resembled a big fist held under her small nose, intimating that any self-assertion on her part was useless and would be regarded as an impertinence.

She was not impertinent. She was preparing to sublimate the situation and to persuade the Mill House to turn its face away from progress. A builder from Lignor had given her an estimate for inserting two new windows and a doorway, and then it had occurred to her that Rachel's little room might be made to perform a right-about-turn. The window towards the road could be blocked up.

The builder assured her that he could change that particular window in three days, but that the new brick-work and plaster would have to dry out. Not a very big matter, certainly. And Mrs. Binnie decided to have Rachel's window altered immediately, and that Rachel should find temporary quarters in the kitchen.

The man from Lignor kept his word, and the work was done to time, but on the day before Rachel was due to return a wooden house on wheels parked itself on the grass just beyond the gate leading into what had once been the mill yard. There were men, and a person who wore a bowler hat and an air of authority. They produced a fire, impedimenta, and an atmosphere of destructive—if latent—energy.

Mrs. Binnie went out to interview the authority in the bowler hat. He was one of those bulbous men with protuberant blue eyes and a walrus moustache. His figure seemed to square the circle. He ambled about on bowed legs. But he listened to Mrs. Binnie; he was paternal.

What were they going to do? Prepare the ground, fell the chestnut tree and remove it, and clear away the posts and chains. He called Mrs. Binnie "m'am," and supposed that she had been notified.

O, yes, she had been notified, but a little fragment of the season was left to her, and these operations would compel her to close down, for who would stop at the Mill House to take tea in the midst of all this destructive energy.

Mr. Bowler Hat was sympathetic. He made sympathetic noises, and his satellites gathered round.

"It does seem rather hard, doesn't it?"

"Well, we've had orders, m'am."

"Of course you have. I haven't any quarrel with you."

She went on to explain that her living depended upon people stopping here for refreshment, and that she was expecting an invalid daughter home to-morrow. And couldn't they postpone cutting down the tree until Rachel had been smuggled inside the house? Yes, her daughter was paralyzed, and she—Mrs. Binnie—did not want her to be shocked by being introduced suddenly to this devastation. No, her daughter had not been told; worries were kept from her.

Mr. Bowler Hat rubbed his chin. The men were sympathetic, much more so than the official mind. They seemed to understand Mrs. Binnie and Mrs. Binnie's activities, even her prejudices against the felling of that tree.

"You see, my daughter was fond of that tree."

One of the men spat.

"It's a bit of a mess-up for you, m'am."

He made a suggestion to Mr. Bowler Hat.

"Ol' Fusspot won't be 'ere for a couple o' days. He's stuck up at Godhurst. There's that left 'and parapet t' come down. We could wangle it, Jim."

"Yes, I'm not saying we couldn't."

"Leave the ol' tree for two days to oblige the lady. Tell Ol' Fusspot the crosscut saw 'ad to go up t' Lignor to be set and sharpened. Anything's good enough f' Ol' Fusspot."

Mr. Bowler Hat assented. He and his gang were with Mrs. Binnie in opposition to the official mind.

"We'll manage it, m'am."

"Now, that is kind of you; it is—really. And if you want any hot water——"

They were at her service. Mr. Bowler Hat explained that the tree was hers, and where would she like the timber stacked? Yes, they would saw it up for her and stack it, Fusspot or no Fusspot. And the white posts and chains? And the paving stones? Round the back? Certainly. Yes, they would be careful with the stones, and they would move all the tables for her. No, nothing should be touched until her daughter had come home and been put to bed.

Mrs. Binnie thanked them, and her little eyes were bright.

"You see, I've got to manage somehow."

"That's all right, m'am. We won't be more of a noosance to you than we can 'elp."

Someone's voice remarked that "It was a bit of a bloody shame," and all because of a lot of sanguinary people in sanguinary motor-cars, and Mrs. Binnie looked a little flushed.

"Don't forget the hot water. I've generally got a kettle on."

And from that moment she had the whole gang in her small pocket.

III

Bonthorn went up in the ambulance to bring Rachel away from No. 7 Seymour Square, and since she was a stretcher case he was able to help. He and the driver of the ambulance had lunched together at a tea-shop in New Cavendish Street, and somewhat self-consciously so in the driver's case. His knife and fork had been so obviously a knife and fork.

The doors of the ambulance were closed, and to Bonthorn sitting there, beside her, it seemed strange to be shut up in a box on wheels in the midst of London. The surge and the striving of the traffic were so audible, and they were aware of the checking and the speeding of the vehicle, its hootings, and its hesitations. Rachel lay still, but to Bonthorn her stillness was relative, suggesting the illusive stillness of a tree whose quietism conceals the aliveness of a multitude of cells.

He wondered how she felt, shut up in this hospital van, with the wheeled life of the city raging outside like a tempest. Whenever he came up from the deep country, London seemed to him

more than a little mad, a chattering Bedlam that would burn itself out. Its very blood was fevered, carrying amid its human corpuscles the germs of an infection. Its life was a kind of delirium.

He was aware of Rachel's eyes gazing at him. They were neither sad nor happy. They seemed to be questioning him and the world without, but tranquilly so. She had ceased to fret at her soul with febrile fingers. There were some knots that could not be untied.

She spoke.

"Doesn't it sound funny. If you'd never seen London, and you were put in a box like an animal, you would wonder what was happening."

He said that he thought that the animal would be rather scared. It might fancy itself in a world of trumpeting and stampeding strange beasts. She smiled faintly.

"It sounds so silly—somehow."

So, she was not afraid. Had she ceased to fear things? Was her surrender so final and so conscious of its own finality? Would she be content to lie and look? Was the spirit of her healed, though her body remained broken?

He asked her if she was comfortable.

"Yes, quite."

She half closed her eyes, but she continued to look at him, nor was he disturbed or made to feel self-conscious by her tranquil, steadfast scrutiny. It did not question. It seemed to accept that which was seen as in a mirror. It dwelt.

They heard an angry voice addressing some competitor.

"D'you want all the bloody road?"

She heard it and smiled.

"There'd be so much more road, wouldn't there——"

He nodded.

"If there were no roads. That's a paradox."

But at that moment, he was thinking of the road where it crossed the bridge at Monks Lacey, and of the chestnut tree that was to fall to pieces like a golden catafalque. He had not told her of the destructions and the transfigurations that were in prospect. To-morrow she might hear the crash of falling timber, and might wonder. But he had begun to suspect that she was her mother's child, more enduring than she looked, and like a

plant that threw up fresh green spikes when the prime growth was trampled.

They came to the Mill House just before sunset. It was one of those gentle October evenings with mist beginning to spread from the river across the meadows. The knees of the old pollarded willows were already involved in it, while their shock heads caught the sunlight. The pungent smell of a weed fire drifted. On the slopes of Stella Lacey the beech trees flamed, though the oaks were still deeply green.

A few people had stopped for tea; but the last party was leaving as the ambulance swung over the bridge, and Rhoda was clearing the tables. Mrs. Binnie, looking strangely old-fashioned, with a plum-coloured shawl over her shoulders, had been standing under the chestnut tree, watching the road. Mr. Bowler Hat and his men were gathered about the house on wheels, putting away picks and shovels, and lighting pipes. One parapet of the bridge had been removed, and a temporary wooden barrier erected.

These were the last teas that the Mill House was to serve this autumn, but Mrs. Binnie was not thinking of that. She had had her eyes on the road, and as the ambulance swung over the swell of the bridge Mr. Bowler Hat came rolling up on his curved legs.

"Perhaps some of us can give you a hand, ma'am."

She thanked him and explained that they had a man friend in the ambulance, and that the friend and the driver would be able to manage.

"But it's so kind of you to think of it."

"Not at all, m'am. Any time you want a little 'elp, you've only got to tell us."

The ambulance drew up by the gap in the posts and chains, and the opening leaves of the rear doors showed to Mrs. Binnie, Bonthorn's very brown face. He smiled at her.

"Yes, here she is."

And Mrs. Binnie climbed past him into the ambulance, and fell gently upon her favourite daughter. They kissed, and for once in her life Mrs. Binnie had nothing to say, though the bread that she had cast upon the waters was yet to be returned to her.

The driver and Bonthorn dealt with Rachel and her stretcher

while the men by the house on wheels stood and watched as though they were being present at some ceremony. Rhoda appeared with the air of willing herself to be cheerful, while having something on her mind.

"Hallo, Rache; glad to have you back."

Mrs. Binnie, slipping in beside the stretcher as it passed the doorway, prepared Rachel for the new dispensation.

"Just a little surprise, Rachie. You are going to camp in the kitchen for a day or two. We've had your room done up, and it's not quite dry yet."

"Shan't I be in the way?"

"No, never. But you won't mind, will you, dear, for a day or two?"

"O, no."

When Bonthorn had played his part, he went out quietly and left the three women alone together. He stood for a moment and looked up at the chestnut tree. Half of it was lit by the sunset, the other half in shadow. And he wondered. Did trees know? Was it wise as to what would happen on the morrow?

He was sorry for the tree.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I

So RACHEL came back.

She did not sleep very well that night, for when the others had gone to bed, she had felt herself to be alone and utterly alone. Life had crept on naked feet to her bedside, and had touched her, and the youth in her had cried out: "I want to live—I want to live." She had felt shut up in the darkness, unable to move or to cry out.

This dreadful stillness! She had pulled the clothes over her head as though to smother the panic that had threatened to make her wail like a child: "Mother, mother!" Her mother was sleeping, or she had supposed that she was sleeping, and Mrs. Binnie's wakefulness had enough to bear.

And suddenly the door had opened, and she had heard the soft shuffle of her mother's slippers. Mrs. Binnie had come and stood beside her bed, as though something had disturbed her, and she had come to make sure that her child slept. Rachel, rigid under the bed-clothes, had made herself breathe as though she slept, and her mother, deceived and reassured, had slipped silently out of the room.

Rachel heard a clock strike two, but she heard no more sounds until the grey of the morning. The house itself still slept, but sounds came to her from the outer world. They puzzled her, and she lay and listened to them. There were the voices of men, but they had a kind of muffled carefulness. She heard the clink and rattle of chains, the sound of a saw, of blows being dealt. There were cracklings, rustlings, an occasional thud.

Rhoda was the first down. She came into the kitchen, and pulled up the blind.

"Slept well, Rache?"

"Yes, not so badly."

It seemed to Rachel that her sister looked a little drawn and dishevelled, as though she had got up in a hurry, and not in the best of tempers. Yes, probably Rhoda was trying to do too much, and the vagaries of many feminine tempers are due to tiredness.

There was a sudden rending crash without, and Rhoda, who was reaching up to hang an enamelled jug on a hook, let the thing fall. It descended upon a couple of plates lying on the dresser, broke one, and rolled off on to the floor.

"Damn!"

She recovered herself and the jug almost instantly.

"Sorry, Rache."

"What on earth's happening out there?"

"I'll go and see."

She went, partly because she wanted to be alone with herself for a minute. She had been too conscious of Rachel's eyes. She found Mr. Bowler Hat and his men at work upon the chestnut tree, and standing among the leafage of a big limb that had been brought down. Mr. Bowler Hat was unhitching a rope.

"Thought we'd get the job done early, Miss. Less likely to worry the other young lady. No, we didn't mean to make so much noise as that, but the—bl—the rope slipped."

She nodded at him.

"All right. Much obliged to you. The sooner—the better."

She returned to the kitchen. She supposed that Rachel would have to be informed, and so she told her about the changes that were in prospect. She spoke casually, flippantly.

"That's the old chestnut tree coming down. O, of course, you haven't heard. There's a new bridge to be put up, and they are slicing off our frontage to widen the road. Some progress."

"The chestnut tree!"

"Well, it's in the way."

"My tree. And mother. Is that why I'm in here?"

Rhoda proceeded to light the stove. She had put on a pair of old gloves.

"Nothing much to worry about. We receive compensation. And the mater had been marvellous about it. She's turning things the other way round. There is to be a tea-garden and a car-park out at the back there. We have had your old window

blocked up, and a new one made looking over the pool and up the valley."

Rachel lay very still, and then her mother hurried in with her small head five seconds in front of her feet. She looked anxiously at Rachel.

"Really—I overslept myself. Disgraceful."

She seemed to hover like a moth, and Rhoda, on her knees at the grate, spoke over a stubborn shoulder.

"I've told her. Not worrying, Rache, are you?"

"No."

"The chaps thought they'd get the job done early. They're a decent crowd."

Mrs. Binnie ceased to hover, and sat down for a moment on the edge of Rachel's bed.

"It's quite all right, Rache, really. We're going to have a lovely garden out at the back. Mr. Bonthorn's going to plan it for us. And after all—it will be much nicer—really. We shall be off the road, you know, so to speak."

Rachel lay inert.

"Yes, mother."

"And you've got such a nice new window."

"Yes, mother. Don't worry on my account."

The work of the day went on, and about nine o'clock the maimed bulk of the old tree came down like thunder. The house shook, and Mrs. Binnie, who was in the tea-room, hurried in to her daughter.

"It's all right, Rachie—that's the worst."

She was surprised, for Rachel smiled at her.

"I don't mind it, mother. It doesn't worry me."

"Really?"

"No. Something's happening. I think I'd like to go out in my chair and watch, and see things happening."

Mrs. Binnie's face smoothed itself out.

"Well—that is a mercy."

II

Stella Lacey, becoming wise as to Bonthorn's involvement in this maid's tragedy, was neither whimsical nor gently cynical. It might be regarded as a sentimental journey that would have

no ending, for obviously he could not marry the girl. That emotional cliché was ruled out.

To Mrs. Gloriana the affair was a part of the social revolution, with the Board of Education in the character of Christ. Or Bonthorn might be regarded as the perennial peasant, or as a sort of Fabre domiciled in Sussex. She did not seek to interfere even with her sympathy. She was too aloof for interference.

Even that battle at the bridge between Mrs. Binnie and the powers of progress was a mere revolutionary skirmish, with Mrs. Binnie in the part of Bayard. But Bayard had ordered every musketeer who was captured to be shot, as though the age of powder and lead could be waved aside with the flash of a cavalier's sword. From her terrace Gloriana could look down upon the stricken field. Here were red flags, poles on tripods, piles of earth and shingle, great barks of timber, dishevelled huts and shelters, a strange machine that swallowed cement and sand and shingle and mixed it in its iron belly, pyramids of road metal, girders, men, red lanterns, a watchman's box, a brazier, trampled turf. Shovels scraped, picks pecked. Cars came crawling to the impasse, and bumped slowly over. The affair was like a siege, with mine and counter-mine, trench and scarp.

She saw the face of the Mill House grey and stark, stripped of its shade.

But, as she said to Bonthorn: "I suppose this sort of thing happens to all of us. Ten years hence this old house of mine will be a school, or perhaps a country hotel, offering a sort of spaciousness and high mutton to the elect. No—mere bitterness is bathos."

But to Mrs. Binnie she did feel as woman to woman. She could smile at herself as something effete and gently sad when she considered how Mrs. Binnie still contended, and stood on her bridge like Bayard. A futile yet indomitable little person.

Bonthorn would have disagreed with her over that adjective. Possibly, she disagreed with it herself. She went and sat with Mrs. Binnie. She promised her plants for the new tea-garden.

"Yes, one has to adapt."

Mrs. Binnie, who had been busy with adaptations for the last ten years, understood perhaps why the great lady had become static.

"Well—I've got my girls to think of, and especially poor Rachel. And she's perfectly wonderful about it."

Which, in a superficial sense, was true. For Rachel, wrapped up in her chair, was asking to be put where things happened. Like a very old woman she did not wish to be tucked away in some green corner, but to be set beside the high-road where life went to and fro. She liked to watch the turbulent happenings at the bridge. She and Mr. Bowler Hat had become gossips. The whole crowd knew her.

"Morning, Miss. Bit fresh to-day."

Rhoda was different, for something was happening in Rhoda, and Mrs. Gloriana was the first to detect those happenings, and to consider them with an oblique, and quiet eye. For Rhoda was abrupt to her. More and more this *farouche* young woman seemed to bend her black brows against the world. And Mrs. Binnie, preoccupied with her many affairs and with Rachel, was more than a little blind to the inwardness and the outwardness of Rhoda.

Bonthorn was not quite so blind as Mrs. Binnie. The days were shortening. It was a beautiful autumn, but very cold, a presage of what was to be, and the hours were full at Yew End. There was so much to be done before Jack Frost became a serious lad, and Old Mischief was shaking his head. "Never knowd dahlias cut back so early." Perhaps on three evenings a week Bonthorn would walk down to the Mill House and sit by the fire. He noticed that both Mrs. Binnie and Rhoda would slip out for a little while and leave Rachel and man alone together.

But their way of doing it was different. Mrs. Binnie always remembered something that had to be done in some other part of the house, even though it was by candlelight. She would loiter awhile before going, but Rhoda would get up and stalk off directly Bonthorn appeared. The egoist in him might have exclaimed: "Your sister doesn't like me," but such egotism as was his did not strut and posture in the house of these three women.

He thought that Rhoda looked ill, rather drawn and sallow, and then one evening he surprised two shadowy shapes standing by the Mill House doorway. And there was awkwardness, a disjointed silence, something sombre and sullen about the girl.

Tanrock's voice was cheerful.

"No—I'm not coming in to-night."

Bonthorn went into the house and left them there together. Nor did Rhoda appear, and Mrs. Binnie's feathers were less sleek than usual. She too was worried about something.

"Why doesn't Fred come in? I heard his voice."

Bonthorn caught Rachel looking at her mother. Surely Mrs. Binnie understood that Rhoda and Fred had very little time together. Bonthorn had brought a plan with him, with the flower-beds made gay with coloured chalks, the grass shown green, the pavement etched in, in ink. He spread it on the kitchen table.

Mrs. Binnie put on her spectacles to look at it. She said that it was lovely, but her voice was not the whole voice of Mrs. Binnie. There were two Mrs. Binnies, a dissociated personality, the Mrs. Binnie who looked at Bonthorn's plan, and the Mrs. Binnie who was somehow worried about her elder daughter.

"Yes, it's lovely, Mr. Bonthorn. And is that the per-go-la?"

"Yes, that's the per-go-la."

But presently she slipped away, and Bonthorn, turning his chair towards Rachel's bed, let the plan lie across his knees.

"Your mother is worried about something."

She lay looking at him. She could lie and look at him undisturbed, though sometimes she remembered her old fear of him. She had ceased to fear. He gave more than he asked, and she was so much older, centuries older. Four months of martyrdom had subtilized her, changing her from the crude child to the watching, waiting woman.

"Mother's always worried, poor dear."

"Less by you—though——"

"O—I don't know."

"But I think I do. You're her pot of musk in the window. Care to look at the plan?"

"Of course."

He stood behind her bed, and with outstretched arms, held it for her to see, and she pointed with a fine, pale finger at the little patches of colour.

"What's that?"

"A lot of long names. Do you want them?"

"Yes."

"*Campanula glomerata, betonica*—— O, well, let's keep to

English. Sweet William, cranesbill, stocks, snapdragons, bergamot."

And then he realized that she was looking at her own raised hand, and looking at it regretfully, pensively. His tenderness hovered, and became playful.

"Yes, that's Madonna Lily."

"Which?"

He touched her hand.

"That."

And suddenly he realized that tears were wetting her cheeks.

"O, so useless! Just look at it, like a bit of wax."

He let the coloured plan fall on the bed, and took her hand and drawing it to him, laid it against his mouth.

"No, not useless."

III

Mrs. Binnie went about softly calling to her elder daughter.

"Rhoda—Rhoda—my dear."

But no voice answered her, and she put her candle down on a table, and going to the front door, opened it and looked out.

"Rhoda, my dear——"

The river was talking to the sedges. She saw a few stars very bright in a cold, clear sky, and a red flower burning by the bridge, the night-watchman's brazier, also a row of red lights. A car came from Lignor, and slackening its speed, went crawling over the temporary bridge. Its engine quickened and with a suggestion of stress and of haste it sped on, cutting the darkness with the long beams of its headlights.

Mrs. Binnie closed the door and returned to her candle. She did not pick it up, but left it burning on the table, and going to the stairs ascended with footsteps that seemed to drag. She came to the darkness that was Rhoda's door, but under it she saw a streak of light.

She hesitated, she knocked.

"Hallo!"

"Rhoda, my dear——"

"What d'you want?"

"May I come in?"

"O, come in."

Mrs. Binnie opened the door. She saw her elder daughter sitting on the bed in her stockings, underknickers and vest. A skirt lay on the floor, and for a moment these two women looked at each other. Rhoda's face was sullen, and suddenly she spoke.

"Shut the door. Bonthorn still there?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Binnie stood by the door, looking bothered.

"What's the matter, Rho?"

"Matter?"

"Yes—there's something."

Rhoda stooped, picked up her skirt, and tossed it into a chair.

"O—I suppose you may as well know. Fred and I are going to be married next week. Yes, quietly, no sob-stuff. You see——"

Mrs. Binnie's fingers picked at her apron.

"My dear—I don't think I quite——"

"O, well—it's quite simple. Something happened a little too previously. The only trouble is—I shall have to start housekeeping on my own. I was going to tell you. I had meant to see you through next year—but with baby coming——"

Mrs. Binnie's small mouth hung open.

"O, my dear——! Really——! I shouldn't have thought it of Fred. Well—really——!"

And then something happened to them both. Possibly it was Rhoda who clutched her mother and dragged her down beside her on the bed.

"Sorry, mumsie. It's all right. Nothing to be ashamed of—really. One's human—you know. I'm not a humbug, and all this stuff and fuss about—— O, well—I've got to go to Fred. Seems like letting you down, and damn it—I didn't want to let you down."

Mrs. Binnie clutched her daughter.

"O, my dear—you ought to have told me before. No, I'm not angry, I'm not—really. But it's taken my breath away somehow—just for the moment. We've got to think of you, yes—of course. I'll manage—all right."

Rhoda took her mother's small face between her hands, and kissed it with a kind of fierceness.

"Mumsie—you're human—too. You're the damnedest little old dear——"

"O, Rho—your language. But, O—my dear, I'm going to be a grandmother. Well—really!"

IV

Bonthorn had gone, and Mrs. Binnie, descending the stairs, found her candle still burning in the tea-room. Perhaps an inch of wax had been consumed, and she sat down and watched the small and steady flame. In the dark and empty hollow of the big room it looked no larger than a baby's finger, a little silver slit in an aureole of light. Mrs. Binnie stared at it as though she were looking through a crevice into some world beyond.

So, Rhoda was to have a baby. And she had heard Rhoda's views upon birth and marriage, and Rhoda belonged to a post-war generation, a generation that was coming to believe in the control of birth, and that the producing of a child was neither a shameful nor a sentimental affair, a cause for sniggers or shocked sniffings. O, yes, some sort of social understanding between the man and the woman—of course, but the mumbo-jumbo cult was dead. The thing was to produce healthy children and not too many of them, and to be prepared to be responsible for them. As for those two words sin and shame let them be stuffed down the throats of all the old pontifical prudes.

Casual desire—indeed! Where would the world be without that young and healthy urge?

To Mrs. Binnie's eyes the candle-flame seemed to grow smaller and smaller. She was conscious of herself as a little ageing woman in the dark hollow of the big room. Nothing but chairs, and tables, and shadows, and that gramophone to which her young things had danced. Rhoda was going— And Rachel—? Rachel had become like a sick and beloved child who would never grow up. And supposing Rachel burnt herself out as that candle would burn itself out?

Mrs. Binnie's eyes looked frightened. Almost her small figure had a crouching furtiveness. Those shadowy corners, and something waiting for her! She felt herself alone. She was alone.

She got up quickly and picked up the candle, and hastened as though flying from some presence into that other room. It

had light and warmth, and the reality of Rachel. Her small voice shivered as she spoke.

"Mr. Bonthorn gone, Rachie?"

"Yes."

"I ought to rub your legs a little. I'll just warm my hands at the fire."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I

So RHODA was married, but not as her mother would have wished it, with orange-blossom and the wedding-march and virginal flimsies, but with unostentatious reasonableness before a registrar, and Mrs. Binnie was left alone with Rachel to face the winter.

"Manage, my dear! Of course I can manage."

The winter was their dead season when chairs and tables were put away, and some occasional and solitary soul crept in for tea and made the most of a very small fire. Mrs. Binnie, the wilful optimist, proposed to feed that fire with billets from the slaughtered chestnut tree, but the wood was less ardent than her courage. But surely one active little woman could look after herself and her daughter, and have time to spare for work in the new garden. Yes, she was going to be very busy planting things.

Rachel, inwardly troubled, and giving her fingers to the household linen, tried to persuade her mother to have help.

"You never get any rest."

But Mrs. Binnie was strangely cheerful. She had moved Rachel back into her own little room, and precisely at seven each evening she lit an oil stove, and carried it into her daughter's bedroom.

"I'm not worrying, my dear. I shall get plenty of rest in my coffin. Besides, I like doing things, I do—really, especially when I've got you to do them for."

"Nobody has ever done things for you, mumsie."

"O, yes, they have. And when the spring comes I'll have one of Annie's girls here and train her. And Mr. Bonthorn's coming in twice a day."

Rachel knew of Bonthorn's coming, for without him she could not be lifted from her bed to her wheeled chair. He was very strong and very gentle; he seemed to know just how to hold her,

while her mother supported her feet. Moreover, he held her just as she wished to be held, as though he understood that there was a part of her that could not bear too much pressure, a love that was wounded and ready to bleed. He seemed to know just how helpless she felt and how she asked not to have it emphasized. Never did she feel at his mercy, or that any advantage would be taken. He carried her as though her broken self was sacred to them both.

She loved him for this.

She just put her arms round his neck and surrendered herself to a compassion that cast out fear.

"What a lot of your time I'm wasting."

He looked at her almost quizzically.

"Think so? Think a little further, Rachel."

He did not kiss her, and for his restraint she was strangely grateful, for his very restraint sustained her. She had a horror of mawkishness, of the thing her more downright sister would have called sex slobber. She belonged to a generation that washed itself more thoroughly, and the candour of its cleanliness was symbolical. He carried both her body and her spirit, child and woman, and sometimes she felt that she was like a bundle of flowers in his arms. She trusted him. She liked him to tease her gently. The silk of her was too tightly stretched to be plucked at with rough fingers.

Yes, she loved him, dearly, hopelessly, consentingly, for he understood, though how he understood she did not know.

The sudden fall of the leaf. Her new window looked up the valley, and it seemed to her that no autumn had known such colour. Or was it that she noticed things more?—being less of a young animal on active legs. She could look up at the high woods, with their goblin gold, and watch the pale willows dropping their leaves into the river. The valley was a great tapestry. There seemed to be crevices of crimson in Bonthorn's beech tree. She watched all those colours burn themselves out, and the tracing of twigs and branches become apparent. It happened very quickly after successive nights of frost, and with a raw mist blanketing the valley. She felt the rawness creeping in at her window.

Winter was here, and such a winter. She could not forecast

its sullen, sombre fierceness, nor the changes it was to bring into her swaddled life. Could anything be reborn in such a winter, when grey day followed grey day, ghost after ghost, with the soil stiff and the river bearded with ice, the hedges all rime, and the birds dying. She was to throw crumbs to the birds from her window, blackbirds, thrushes, chaffinches, sparrows, and a robin who learnt to flutter in and sit on the rail of her bed. The breath of the bridge-builders was to be silver smoke. An old woodman was to be found dead in one of those coppices with his billhook beside him. And she was to find in herself a little flicker of new life, but that was not yet.

Her mother at work in that half-acre behind the house, wearing an old yellow jumper and gloves, and a small black hat pressed down over her little peaky face. She saw Bonthorn there too, busy with a spade, but very soon their activities were restricted. The winter sealed up the soil. It became impossible to plant in that heavy, frozen loamy clay.

With the fall of the leaf, the valley seemed to grow conscious of its nakedness like Eve after eating the forbidden fruit. The invisible became visible. Everything looked so much smaller and less distant. You felt yourself at the back of the world's stage on a grey winter afternoon at about four o'clock. Rachel had glimpses of Bonthorn in his garden or orchard, and from her kitchen window Mrs. Martha could look down upon the Mill House.

Being a good woman she liked to look down upon it, to condescend to it in righteousness. She was feeling more kindly to Mrs. Binnie, and even towards Rachel, for it seemed to Martha that Mrs. Binnie was being chastened by her rebellious children. Your nonconformist expects the younger generation to conform, and Martha knew all about Rhoda's sudden marriage.

"Disgraceful—I call it."

She would bring in her candour and serve it to Bonthorn with the buttered toast. She believed in speaking her mind, however rudely that mind might function on occasions. Even her austerity liked to consider itself indispensable, and Mr. Bonthorn was exhibiting himself too much at the Mill House.

"But what can you expect with girls showing their legs? No modesty—no morals."

Martha was indeed an admirable Martha, but her candour was too personal, and Bonthorn was tempted.

"What are—morals, Martha?"

She turned in the doorway to survey him.

"If we can't resist our appetites, sir."

"Well, you had better take this toast away. I always fall with it."

So, he was being fantastic, was he! She said: "I'm sorry for the poor woman. She's a decent body, and she'll kill herself if she goes on lifting those heavy stones."

Bonthorn's blue eye was attentive.

"You've been in Canaan, Martha."

"I can't help looking out of a window. I can't help seeing her dragging those stones about at the back of her house. She oughtn't to be doing it. That strong girl of hers might have done better than——"

But there were occasions when Bonthorn closed Martha's mouth. He said such queer things.

"A baby may be bread to a woman. Mrs. Buck is a mother, and she's going to be a grandmother. Stones—Martha——"

Martha made a clucking noise with her tongue.

"She isn't fit for it. A little wisp of a woman like that."

The door closed, but a moment later it was reopened.

"When I'm cooking—I'm cooking. There's room in the oven for somebody else's small joint. I suppose you have no objection, sir?"

"None at all, Martha. Carry on."

But that particular day was less grey than its sisters, and a huge red sun was hanging in the high woods above Beech Farm. Bonthorn hurried his tea and went out, and in that vivid moment before the day faded he saw that little distant figure, half yellow, half black, clasping a stone to its bosom, and carrying it to the river bank. He put a match to his pipe and marched down the lane.

Mrs. Binnie was incorrigible. Baffled by the frost, she yet was determined to have her paved terrace and her pergola. She had purchased larch and chestnut poles, and a truck load of cinders, and the cinders were to be spread as a mattress for her stones. As for the strong lad he had not yet appeared. During that dead season it was necessary to husband one's resources.

The men at the bridge were putting away their tools. The brazier was a red flower, and above it a big black kettle hung on a tripod. The new bridge, a grey streak of reinforced concrete, was to be up by the new year. Bonthorn passed the time of day with Mr. Bowler Hat, who, with many mufflings, looked more globular than ever.

"More frost."

The Mill House shut off the setting sun, and the shadow had a cold solidity. Bonthorn passed round the house, and caught Mrs. Binnie in the act of removing a stone from the pile arranged by the bridge-builders.

He said: "You mustn't do that, mother."

She crinkled up her small face at him.

"But I'm only taking the little ones and putting them ready. It keeps me nice and warm."

He took the stone away from her, and carrying it to the river bank placed it on the small cairn she had collected.

"Absolutely—I forbid you to do it."

He crossed over to the heap of cinders and rubbed the toe of a boot against them.

"And you've split your finger—too."

"I just pinched it between two stones. I've got it tied up."

"So—I see."

He went and stood over her. He pointed the stem of his pipe at her.

"I forbid you to do it. I'll come down and lay those stones for you. Yes, you can help to rake the cinders when I have spread them."

"But it's asking too much of you, Mr. Bonthorn, it is, really."

"Is it!"

He took her gently by the arm and marched her towards the house, watched by Rachel from the kitchen window.

"This isn't Egypt. I'll let you try your hand, perhaps, at nailing lattice-work on the pergola. But only on one condition."

She looked up at him sideways from under her funny little hat.

"And what is it?"

"That you don't hit your finger with the hammer."

"But I always do hit my finger."

He laughed softly and opened the door.

"That's rather awkward. Well, what am I to do about it? We'll ask Rachel."

II

Mrs. Binnie had left them alone together for five minutes, and the blind was up, and the red afterglow mimicking the fire. Bonthorn had put out his pipe. He stood beside her chair, and looked out of the window.

"I've forbidden her to do that."

Rachel's left hand moved to and fro.

"I wanted you to—— I can't stop her. She's——"

"Unconquerable. I'll lay the stones, and put in those posts. I've plenty of time."

Her eyes looked up at him.

"Hold my hand."

"May I?"

"But don't—stop her—altogether. She's like a child—in some ways. Isn't it funny? I'm her baby—and she's my child. I understand—now—why I let her do things for me. It used to fret me, O—horribly. But not now."

Deliberately and slowly he bent down and kissed her hair.

"You have beautiful hair, beloved. And something else—too. That's what I put my lips to. You—understand?"

She laid a hand against his cheek.

"I never thought it could be like this. I was so—raw—some how."

"Hardly that."

"O, yes—I was. And I used to be afraid of you."

"But not now?"

"Not now."

III

The frozen ruts of the lane were too unfriendly for Rachel's chair, but there was the carriage drive leading up to Stella Lacey where no cars came. And that was Rachel's highway. Sometimes Bonthorn took her, sometimes Mrs. Binnie, and when her chair crossed the high road the man with the red flag who held the bridgehead would assume an air of sentimental authority and carry the flag at Rachel's service.

"That's all right, Miss. Let 'em all come and wait."

Flapping his arms afterwards he would chant a sort of refrain to his comrades.

"Let 'em bloody well wait, bloody well wait. Gosh—I'm glad I'm not at Wipers."

Old Mischief, sawing wood in an out-house, with a stubby old pipe stuck in his mouth, would listen to the saw, "Swish-swoo—swish-swoo," and look at the pile of sawdust. Sawdust, a rag doll stuffed with sawdust. That was what that poor young woman suggested to him. And Mr. Bonthorn——! Well, it was a funny mix-up, sure-ly!

Mr. Osgood could say that he had never remembered a worse winter, and that like a woman it began by being sulky and grew more and more grim until you hunched your shoulders and went out of doors and spat. And just as you said of your old woman's sulks: "They can't last," and yet found that their wind was set in the northeast for a month, so this winter confounded the prophets. No sun shone and the north wind blew; ponds were sealed up, the soil was proof against the plough and the spade. Up at Lignor burst pipes prevailed. But Old Mischief had one cause for crowing over the malignant fiend. Quite early in the spell he had gone round emptying all the water butts at Yew End.

"Reckon I've done he over them. Thought he's burst the lot, he did."

Bonthorn, looking down and across at the Mill House, saw it smudged with a kind of grey gloom. It seemed to emerge dimly out of the dawn and melt away again into the dusk, though at night it showed two bright windows. The river crackled with ice; the shock-headed willows seemed frozen into voiceless fear. Birds scuffled and scratched in the dry hedge-bottoms and in the woods for food, and gathered round kitchen doorways. Starved rabbits began to peel the bark from the trees. It was a winter of dreadful deadness, sunless, windless, without stars.

Mrs. Binnie both felt the cold and defied it. She scuttled down in the morning to light Rachel's stove and to put life into the dead kitchen-range. The old stone house seemed to grow colder and colder, as though the long frost had penetrated its vitals, for it had no damp-course and the river was at its doors.

For days it would be enveloped in a thin and stagnant mist, with the windows frosted, and one little plume of smoke climbing straight into the still air.

The milk froze in the larder, and the butter had to be thawed before it would spread. Apples could be bounced on the floor like marbles, but the Mill House well was proof against Jack Frost. Rachel listened to the clank of the pump handle, and it seemed to repeat her mother's felicitations: "That's a mercy—that's a mercy."

Mrs. Binnie herself looked smaller and a little more shrivelled, and the bridge of her nose was a sharp edge. She scuttled about all day, multifariously active, cooking, washing, cleaning, rubbing her daughter's legs, interviewing tradesmen and sometimes scolding them. Nor could she be kept indoors. She took Rachel out in her wheeled chair, looking like a minute nursemaid pushing a monstrous pram, and though Rachel helped by working the levers, Mrs. Binnie got a little out of breath when the road ascended.

"Don't push so hard, mother."

"It keeps me warm, my dear."

Rhoda, coming down from Lignor, and suggesting the hiring of help, was cheerfully rebuffed. She and Fred were well able to help with money.

"Oh—I can manage, my dear. A strong girl indeed! Where can you find a strong girl these days? O, yes, they may be strong enough, but most of them are not willing."

She persisted in going out to work in the new garden where Bonthorn was laying flagstones and digging post-holes for the pergolas. He allowed her to be a little busy with the rake, and to imagine that she was helping him to prepare the stone-bed, remembering Rachel's appeal: "Don't stop her altogether." Besides, the little bird had to hop about and keep itself warm. But as for the pergola and its rustications she was quite hopeless with a hammer; she bent the nails or hit her gloved fingers.

When the night came Robinia's hour arrived. The curtains were drawn, the lamp lit and Rachel's chair drawn up by the fire, and Mrs. Binnie was alone with her child. She liked to comb and brush Rachel's hair, for as Bonthorn had said, Rachel had very beautiful hair, crisp and black and glossy. She was letting

it grow into a half-shingle, and Mrs. Binnie kept it in shape, a kind of beautiful nimbus.

"Frost again to-night, Rachie. You're all crackly."

"You must be tired, mumsie."

"No, I'm not. It soothes me—doing this. You've got such lovely hair, my dear."

She seemed to exult over her daughter's hair. This helpless child of hers, the one precious thing that was left her! In combing her hair she was smoothing out all the ravelled ends of life, somehow soothing herself and Rachel.

At nine o'clock they would hear Bonthorn's knock. He was as regular as the Stella Lacey clock chanting in its cupola. He came down from Yew End to carry Rachel to her bed.

Chapter Thirty

I

IT WAS Mrs. Binnie's custom to put a hot-water bottle in Rachel's bed an hour before Bonthorn carried her to it, and Dr. Carver had warned Mrs. Binnie to be careful about this bottle. He had explained to her that since Rachel had no feeling in her lower limbs it would be an easy matter for her to be burnt, and that Mrs. Binnie would be well advised to use a very large bottle with a double cover and not to make it very hot.

It so happened on one of the coldest nights in December that Robinia forgot the bottle, and did not discover the omission until Rachel was in bed. She was shocked at her own forgetfulness.

"Well, really, my silly old head!"

She hurried to the kitchen to fill the bottle from the kettle, and after carefully drying the funnel and screwing in the stopper, she held the pink flannel cover against her cheek. Yes, the temperature was just as it should be, and she carried the bottle into Rachel's room, and slipped it into her daughter's bed.

"So sorry, dear. That's right. Just clear of your feet."

Mrs. Binnie returned to the kitchen to put things ready for the morning, for it was easier to get them ready when one was warm than to fumble with cold fingers. It was one of those stark, windless nights when the very air seemed frozen. Mrs. Binnie had left the candle in Rachel's room, and Rachel lay and watched the little flame. To her this night had come just as other nights, the gentle extinction of another dying day. Yet, had she imagined it, and had Bonthorn's arms held her a little more firmly, with a more possessive pressure? And she had been more poignantly conscious of her life's limitations, and of the little she could give to those who gave.

It was while she lay watching the candle-flame, more conscious of inward than of outward things, that some sensation projected an image upon her brain. Heat, a hot object in the

bed with her and near to her feet. It was as though she heard a voice saying: "Mother has made the bottle too hot." But almost instantly that impersonal voice became a sudden, clear, clamorous cry in the very core of her consciousness. The mere sensation, travelling from percept to concept, flashed on her as something miraculous yet real. Sensation. An object that emitted heat and made her aware of its presence. The skin of her feet had ceased to be dead skin.

The significance of the thing seemed to flash on her like a sudden light. She was bewildered, incredulous, afraid. She lay very still. She could feel her heart beating hard and fast. Had her inner consciousness played her a trick? Was she imagining it or had her skin suddenly become alive to the warmth of that bottle?

She lay there and tried to efface the previous impression, to make consciousness a blank or like an impartial hand that could touch and appraise without passion or prejudice. Had she been the fool of an illusion? She closed her eyes. She tried to efface consciousness, as though she could fall asleep and wake again to test the illusion. Almost the hurrying of her heart hurt her. She felt hot, smothered, ready to cry out like a child.

Was she feeling that bottle with her feet or with her mind? Was the reaction physical or mental?

But the thing was burning her, it was too hot or too near, and suddenly that feeling of discomfort became a little spasm of exquisite, inward anguish, an anguish that was joy. This could be no illusion. She could not conceive an image of a bottle that was too hot. She—was—feeling.

And suddenly she cried out.

"Mother—mother, come quickly."

She never forgot the frightened look on her mother's small face. Mrs. Binnie had rushed across from the kitchen, and the effort had made her breathless.

"My dear—what is it?"

"Mother—I can feel."

"Feel?"

"Yes, my feet and the bottle. It's too hot."

Mrs. Binnie's mouth drooped. For the moment the accusation and the reality were tangled up in her mind.

"Too hot? It can't be—— I——"

And then she understood. She gave a little, breathless cry, and slipping a hand under the bed-clothes, groped for the thing. She found that it was lying six inches away from Rachel's feet.

"My dear, it's not touching you."

For an instant they looked into each other's eyes.

"Mother—then—I can feel—warmth. Something—something's coming back. O, mumsie!"

Mrs. Binnie seemed to fall forward on the bed.

"O, God, don't make a fool of me. O, God, let it be true."

II

Mrs. Binnie sat on a chair by the bed and wept.

"O, Rachie—— I——"

But to Rachel had come a strange calmness. She lay motionless, with a slight frown on her forehead as though she were struggling with some problem. Her gaze was concentrated upon that prominence where her two feet raised the bed-clothes. It was an unblinking and steady gaze.

She said: "If I can feel—perhaps I can move, even if it is ever so little. Look, mother."

Mrs. Binnie clasped her hands together, and then turned back the clothes so that Rachel's feet were exposed. They were in the shadow, and Mrs. Binnie changed the position of the table, but still the light was not good.

"Hold the candle, mother."

Mrs. Binnie did so.

"I am trying to move my toes. Can you see anything?"

"No, my dear, not yet."

"Now?"

"No."

She heard Rachel emit a deep sigh, as though she had been holding her breath and willing those toes to move. Then, Mrs. Binnie had an inspiration. She rubbed a first finger softly against the sole of Rachel's left foot, and she obtained a response, a faint movement, a jerk, an involuntary contraction of the muscles. Mrs. Binnie uttered a little cry. She was so excited that she was

holding the candle askew, and some grease dropped upon the bed-clothes.

"You moved, Rachie."

"Did I?"

"Yes—there was a sort of twitch."

"It wasn't me that moved."

"Not you?"

"I mean—I wasn't trying just then. But are you sure?"

Mrs. Binnie repeated the experiment and obtained the same flickering reaction.

"There! It happened again. It did—really. O, my dear, it must mean that something's coming back."

And then she became aware of the guttering candle and the grease spots on the bed.

"Well—really! What—am—I doing? I don't think I quite know what I am doing."

She put the candlestick back on the table, and gave way to a sudden and tender impulse. She was weeping. She bent down and kissed her daughter's feet and wetted them with her tears.

"O, mother, you mustn't do that."

She held out her arms to Robinia, and Mrs. Binnie replaced the bed-clothes and gave herself to the embrace.

"O, my darling, it's a miracle. Dr. Carver must be told. I wish we were on the telephone. He ought to know at once. I think I'll go up to Lignor."

But Rachel held her.

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

"Then I'll go to Mr. Bonthorn's."

"Mother—I don't want him to know—until Dr. Carver's been. I want to be sure. O—I want to be sure."

III

As though to welcome and bless this tremor of hope the sun rose as a visible luminary. His gold might be very pale gold, but he ushered in a pageant of smoky clouds and blue sky, and though the earth's smile was ice it satisfied Mrs. Binnie. She had been too excited to sleep very soundly. She was up before the sun, and in time to see stars flickering like spangles on black velvet.

At seven o'clock she was in conversation with the night-watchman at the bridge. She found him stamping up and down in front of his brazier and wearing one of those funny woollen helmets that are reminiscent of the trenches in winter.

"I want to get a message to the doctor."

The man told her that he was going off duty at eight when the gang arrived, and that he was cycling up to Lignor and would leave a message for her.

"Not bad news, m'am, I hope?"

"No, I think it's good news."

"That's the stuff to give 'em."

Mrs. Binnie took him out an early cup of tea and a massive slice of bread and butter. She had slipped in and found Rachel awake, and scarcely had dared to ask her questions.

"Slept, my dear?"

"Not very much. I've little pricking feelings in my feet."

"O, Rachie, it's coming back. I've sent word to Dr. Carver."

Bonthorn arrived at nine, but those two trembling and excited women maintained a conspiracy of silence, and when Bonthorn was told by Robinia that Rachel had decided to stay in bed that morning he was a little troubled. Was there any change for the worse? But Mrs. Binnie reassured him, and he went back to Yew End between the rimed hedges that glistened in the winter sunlight. The ruts in the lane might have been grooves worn in the stone blocks of a Roman street by ancient chariot wheels. There was a huge patch of blue sky over the Beech Farm woods. The dog came scuffling out under the holly hedge to meet him, and from through the still air came the swish-swoosh of Old Mischief's saw.

Rollo bounced up and down.

"What of the day, master, what of the day?"

As yet Bonthorn had not suspected the sunlight of smiling at him.

Carver, overworked and very ready to be irritable, received Mrs. Binnie's message as he was entering his surgery. Another visit to be made, and the surgery choc-a-bloc, and no time for a cigarette! He could say that this was the most damnable winter on record, and that he lived in a world that coughed and sweated and called him up needlessly at night. Influenza—detestable

word! He had been going about with a temperature and a grumbling head, and ready to spank any elderly valetudinarian who wished to be in the fashion.

"I think I've got a little chill, doctor."

Yes, there were people whom he wished in their coffins. But Mrs. Binnie had had the sense to send her message early, not like some of the old women of both sexes who became a little nervous at nine o'clock at night. He managed to clear the surgery by half-past ten, and since he had two patients to visit at Hook Hill he took the Mill House on his way.

On such occasions Dr. Carver did not knock and wait upon doorsteps. He thrust in and appeared suddenly in bedrooms. He appeared to Robinia in her kitchen, and abruptly so.

"Anything wrong? Not you is it?"

Her small face was like the day's luminary.

"O, doctor, Rachel can feel. And I managed to make her toes twitch."

"The devil you did! Let's go and see."

In Rachel's room he forgot his headache and his irritations, and all those people who expected him to be as cheerful as sin. The bed-clothes were turned back, and borrowing a pin from Mrs. Binnie, he used it with varying degrees of emphasis. Rachel had been told to shut her eyes, and to keep them shut.

"Feel anything?"

"Yes."

"Which foot?"

"The right."

"Whereabouts?"

"On the big toe—I think."

Carver grunted. He did various things to Rachel, with Mrs. Binnie watching like an eager bird. And then, quite suddenly, he replaced the bed-clothes and straightened his back.

"Well—that's—great. You can open your eyes, Rachel."

"Doctor, you do think——?"

"My dear lady, she can feel, and I can get some reactions in the muscles. That's about as much—and a good deal. It's what I hoped for, and didn't dare to count on."

He stood looking at Rachel's feet where they raised the clothes.

"When did it happen?"

"Last night, doctor. I'd put a hot-water bottle in the bed. But isn't it rather extraordinary, so sudden?"

Carver wiped his moustache.

"Nothing's extraordinary. We don't always know enough—that's all. The pressure of clotted blood, and the clot is absorbing. Just nature. I'm damned glad we left Nature alone."

Rachel lay silent. It was Mrs. Binnie who asked the inevitable question.

"Doctor, will she be able to walk?"

"Probably. I don't say how—well. She has been something of a jig-saw puzzle to us. Now, don't you begin to be too—too——"

"Hopeful?"

"No, not exactly that. Shall we say—too excited, too much in a hurry. We must wait a while and see."

And then he bent over Rachel and smiled and patted her shoulder.

"You're your mother's case. I've never seen a more devoted piece of nursing. I thought you would have bed-sores, my dear, and you didn't."

Rachel looked up at him, and then at her mother.

"I think I know. I ought to know. Whatever comes to me, doctor, will have come through her."

IV

Were the words whispered to her mother, or did Robinia read them in her daughter's eyes?

"Go and tell him."

Mrs. Binnie did not wait to put on a hat. She took down an old coat of Rachel's that hung on a peg, and with the sleeves flopping over her hands, hurried out to carry the news to Bonthorn, but first she had to tell it to those friends of hers—the bridge-builders. She knew quite a number of them by their Christian names, Fred and Jim and Jack and Albert and Arthur. Bowler Hat she always addressed as Mr. Hands, for she judged that it would have been unseemly of her to address a foreman as Fred.

"I've had such good news, boys."

She could hail them collectively as boys, and they gathered round her.

"Someone left you a fortune, m'am."

"Better than that. My girl is going to get well—or if not quite well—the doctor thinks she will be able to walk."

They were not particularly eloquent or original in their congratulations, but they were pleased because Mrs. Binnie was so obviously in a state of joy. Their simplicities understood hers. Mr. Bowler Hat raised his headgear as though the occasion belonged to the ceremonious. It was neither a wedding nor a funeral, but it was an occasion.

"Well, you do deserve it, m'am, and so does the young lady."

Warmed by their friendly faces she hastened on up the frozen lane where dead leaves and desiccated grasses made a little shivering sound in the hedgerows when the light air moved. She came to the white gate in the holly hedge, and passed through it and up the path. The garden had its winter nakedness, and its hedges ceased to conceal its secrets, but she could not see Bonthorn anywhere. From one of the lodges came sounds of toil, the snarl of a saw, and the sharp strokes of a felling-axe splitting logs.

She made towards the lodge. The saw paused for a moment in its play, and she heard Old Mischief's voice.

"She's getting a bit sulky, she be. Y'have t'soap a saw just as y'soap a woman."

Bonthorn's voice replied:

"I didn't know you were a diplomat, John."

"That be a long word. Sometimes you give 'em sarce, sometimes a little soap, and not too much of either. You should always keep a woman guessin', sir."

And Mrs. Binnie laughed. She did not appear in the doorway of the lodge. She called to Bonthorn, and he came out to her.

"Hallo! It's you, Mrs. Binnie."

Which was obvious, as obvious as her happy and excited face. Old Osgood, running a thumb along the teeth of the saw, made of the saw's sulkiness an excuse for listening.

"Dr. Carver has just been. Rachel can feel in her feet. Yes, and move her toes a little."

If Old Mischief expected Mr. Bonthorn to leap in the air, or strike a dramatic attitude, he was disappointed. Mr. Bonthorn

was not a gentleman who showed off, but Mr. Osgood could not let the occasion pass without having a finger in it. He appeared in the doorway.

"You tell 'er from me, Mrs. Buck, that she's got to walk to 'er weddin'"—and he sniggered.



Chapter Thirty-One

I

BONTHORN did not show off, and yet he could appreciate the humour of exhibitionism, especially the ostentation of the well informed and the seriously minded. He could remember squatting under a beech tree beside the track that climbs the south downs to Chanctonbury, and on a chalky bank opposite him a very particular flower had been in bloom. A party of girls out for the day had come laughing and panting through the steep, green splendours, and had paused in the hollow way to acclaim that flower.

"What is it?"

"Chicory—I think."

Bonthorn had nursed his knees and remained mute, but an earnest gentleman arriving from above with an air of out-of-door integrity and a wife, had been unable to restrain his knowledge.

"Nice patch of viper's bugloss."

He had spoken the words as though informing his wife and the world at large, and as though those maidens were so many scattered flints, but Bonthorn had known that the superior fellow had had an eye on the ladies. A well-informed person, very much without a hat or tie, grey bagged, cultivating the country and his own high glistening forehead. Bonthorn had watched him swing on down the woodland track with a little, pedagogic swagger.

"Viper's bugloss, my dear! Ha, viper's bugloss!"

Yes, even the most cultured of pilgrims cannot refrain from exhibiting themselves in public at the expense of a flower.

Possibly there were people who would have accused Bonthorn of exhibiting himself as the sentimental knight on that half-acre of ground behind the Mill House at Monks Lacey. Pottering about with an old woman, while the eyes of the daughter watched

his prowess from a window. Mrs. Gloriana, having heard that life had decided to leave Rachel a legacy, came down to congratulate both mother and daughter, and through Rachel's window saw Bonthorn at work. The new paved terrace by the river was taking shape. Mrs. Binnie was out there with Mr. Bonthorn, ready to scatter a little more ash or sand under the flagstones as Bonthorn laid them so that each stone should be steady. He had all the ground pegged out and prepared.

Mrs. Gloriana remembered her Bible. Jacob serving his seven years for Rachel. And then she realized that while she had been observing Bonthorn, she herself had been under observation. The eyes of the girl watched her, and in them the great lady divined defiance.

"Mine. Yes, and I'm without shame."

But Mrs. Gloriana could transcend the conventions. She could agree to sponge out the figures on the slate of her generation, for even the slate itself was an obsolete convention. Stella Lacey would be effaced. Life was an experiment, an adventure in psychology, and perhaps she saw Rachel as youth reborn, youth subtilized and enriched and comprehending. She wanted to say certain things to Rachel, to tell youth that it need not stand on guard.

She said: "If there is virtue in courage your mother should receive—" And then she paused, feeling that there are occasions when the spoken phrase is always on stilts, and that silence can be more significant and less sententious. She went and stood for a moment by the window. She realized Bonthorn's strength, the deliberate and patient purposefulness of the man as he handled those heavy stones.

She said: "That's quite good to watch," and suddenly her eyes turned very gently to Rachel—"And you—you must be glad—knowing that you will not have to lie and look. One wants to play with the other children."

The watchfulness went out of Rachel's eyes.

"Yes, I'm learning to play. It's like learning some things all over again."

She was learning them differently, and somehow like a grown-up child, realizing the significance of her movements and her mother's pride and delight in them. For Mrs. Binnie life was re-

peating itself. Her beloved child was learning to stand and to walk, and though Mrs. Binnie's possession of the babe was not complete, it sufficed her. She exclaimed like a joyous mother over the miracle of growth.

"Yes, you are moving them, Rachie, you are really."

She was referring to Rachel's toes, and since the movement was conscious and wilful it was the more significant.

Carver, coming in daily in spite of a spate of sickness, turned back the bed-clothes and confessed himself astonished.

"Well, you're doing wonderfully. Keep it up. Keep it up, Mrs. Buck."

Rachel could flex and extend her feet, and Mrs. Binnie and the district nurse worked hard upon the muscles. In spite of that most stubborn winter life seemed to be flowing back into Rachel with the insurgence of the year's sap. How much of her youth and her strength would return Carver could not promise, but she would be no dead thing pinned on a board.

Night and morning Bonthorn came in to carry her to and from her bed, but if he carried her a little differently, she too was less inert in his arms. She hoped. She was to be to him something more than a paralyzed child. It was as though she grew up all in a moment and became woman.

She remembered that night when they kissed each other as human lovers kiss.

"O, man."

"Dearest."

And suddenly she grew very grave, and a little frightened, as though she had ventured too far, and for his sake was urged to draw back.

"Not yet, not quite yet. I'm not sure——"

"Of me, or of yourself?"

She half-closed her eyes.

"No, of how much use I shall be to you."

"As mere matter?"

"Well, yes. But—we're practical people—these days. We want to be real and have things real."

"Even—our mysteries."

He held her and seemed to laugh over her deeply.

"Dear realist, and yet how much mystery there is in you, even

in the reality you call your body. Just a fragment of consciousness that behaves. What rot!"

She touched his face with her fingers.

"Put me down, man. You've held me long enough."

But instead of carrying her to her room he put her back in her chair before the fire, and sat down beside her, and Mrs. Binnie, looking in on them, smiled and found further occupation. And for a while they were silent, watching the fire.

She said: "I don't think I shall ever quarrel with things again. Just to be able to walk and to go to things and touch them. It will be so good—if it happens."

Somehow he was so sure that it would happen.

"Yes, you will walk and touch and take."

She smiled at him.

"But not quite as I used to. Things will be a little slower."

He nodded.

"Quite right. But isn't that what the world wants? A little more of the pony-trap idea and less of the aeroplane. I suppose that sounds sententious. But haven't you learnt to look at things?"

"Yes, I think I have."

II

Mrs. Binnie had to be allowed her surprise, the preparing of a little *tableau vivant*, but before this piece of stagecraft could be perfected there had to be rehearsals. Rachel was to stand erect, on her own feet and unsupported. The experiment was deliberate and secret, carried out after tea-time when the old house had warmed itself.

"Don't help me, mother."

She sat on the edge of her bed with her feet touching the floor, and with her hands resting on the bed she tried to raise herself, but neither on the first nor the second occasion had she the strength to do so, and Mrs. Binnie, standing by, anxiously watched her child's struggles.

"You are trying too much, Rachie."

"I must try."

"Perhaps you can stand—if I help you."

Mrs. Binnie put an arm round her daughter, and giving her the support of her small body, enabled Rachel to rise to her feet.

"There, you are up."

"Let me try standing alone."

"O, do be careful."

"Let me try."

Mrs. Binnie withdrew her support, and for a couple of seconds Rachel stood, and then suddenly she tottered. Her knees gave way, but Mrs. Binnie caught her, and they collapsed together on the bed.

"My dear, you're not hurt?"

"No. But I stood. You weren't touching me."

"Yes, Rachie, you stood."

Day after day this experiment was repeated, until Rachel could stand erect and unsupported. Next, she was raising herself from the bed without her mother's help, while Mrs. Binnie stood by with clasped hands, solicitous and watchful. She held her breath. She applauded.

"Isn't that splendid. Why, soon you'll be walking."

The rehearsals were complete, and the first tableau ready for the ascent of the curtain. Bonthorn, coming down from Yew End on a Sunday evening, found mother and daughter before the fire. Rachel was seated in a chair, and when Bonthorn entered she rose slowly to her feet and stood before him.

In that moment he was aware of something strange in her, of her deliberate and young dignity suddenly erect before him. She seemed taller than he had believed her to be, and undoubtedly she was older, not in time but in self-knowledge. Her very clothes were not the garments of a girl, but a sheath suggesting a spathe or a robe. He was conscious of feeling in her presence the exquisite awe and wonder of the lover. She looked so dark and still and steadfast, standing before him as she had never stood in the hurry of her less stately youth.

He stood looking at her for fully half a minute, with a silence that was both homage and salutation. She was not disquieted by his gaze. She understood it. And Mrs. Binnie, watching them both, realized that Bonthorn had become a figure in her tableau.

Slowly, and with a faintly mysterious smile Rachel seated herself in her chair. The very deliberation of her movements seemed part of a spell. And to Bonthorn, lover and mystic, she appeared as a creature of the creative fancy, a symbolic figure such as man

in his super-sensuous moments dreams of and translates into colour, music or words.

If he had knelt to her he would have knelt as the young man in armour, not as a sophisticated Georgian on his silken knees to sex. To him and with him she transcended sex, though sex might be manifest in the colour and the shape of her. For in them both were other mysteries.

He completed Mrs. Binnie's tableau.

"The Queen is seated. I salute the Queen."

He took one of her hands, and letting it rest in the old-fashioned way on the back of his wrist, he kissed her fingers. It was done half playfully, and with the passion that can be poignant because of its playfulness. And Mrs. Binnie, with her hands folded over her bosom, put her head on one side and thought the picture perfect. Her simplicity held the serpent of sophistication pinned under its small feet.

She said:

"I'm sure you didn't dream, Mr. Bonthorn, when you opened that door——"

He turned from daughter to mother.

"Dream?—I'm always dreaming. When we stop dreaming—we die. One just opens a door, but—of course—it depends—on how you pass through the doorway."

He had the air of laughing without making any sound. He went and put his hands on Mrs. Binnie's shoulders, and kissed her.

III

A month from that day Rachel was walking. As she said laughingly to Bonthorn she had escaped the crawling stage and raids upon the coal-box, and those disastrous moments when one fell flat upon one's face and sent up an angry howl. Moreover, she had discovered laughter, but very unnoisy laughter, an exquisite and tremulous delight in the humour of being herself. This business of walking made her look graver than she felt, for she had to concentrate upon it like a very young child.

There were occasions when she subsided suddenly upon a chair or a couch, or even on the edge of a table. She had begun by using two sticks, but the sticks were soon discarded. She liked

to have her hands free and ready. She carried herself in those early days with a singular erectness, a kind of stately rigidity that made her laugh when she surprised a reflection of herself in a long mirror.

"Just like a fashion-plate."

But to Bonthorn there was nothing stilted in her movements. To him her walking was a deliberate and stately glide, the poise of the young priestess. She looked so intensely serious when she walked, and he was tempted to fancy that had some tall flower been blessed with feet it would have walked just as she walked. Yes, in and out of the sunlight and shadow. For sometimes he thought that he heard the laughter of flowers, a bell-sound, blue-throated in the dawn and in the cool of the evening.

During those early days Mrs. Binnie was apt to follow Rachel about, or to watch her anxiously through doorways. She might catch one of those tentative feet and stumble. Moreover, Robinia never tired of watching her child repeating her own past, and if Mrs. Binnie was sentimental about it she was sentimental with a difference. For life is not just repetition when you yourself have marched twenty years.

The bridge-builders had departed, and the new stretch of tarmac flowed within a yard of Mrs. Binnie's doorstep. As she expressed it: "If you put your nose outside—you may get it cut off." She warned her child, but Rachel did not need the warning; she had ears and eyes. When some lorry or van rumbled past its bulk darkened the windows of the tea-room that looked towards the road. They were up against progress, the scowling face of speed that snarled "Damn you, get out of the way." If it occurred to Rachel to wonder what the old house would suffer when the summer traffic began to flow, she concealed that curiosity. Possibly she was more concerned with immediate things. Also, she was beginning to feel curiously protective towards her mother. Mrs. Binnie was sixty and looked ten years older than her age, and the hard winter seemed to have had a shrivelling effect on her.

When Rachel took her first walk out of doors she went over the bridge and fifty yards up the Beech Farm lane. Bonthorn was with her. She needed a smooth surface for her feet, and the tarred road gave it, but the road was for the world on wheels.

The frozen, turfy stretches of the lane were safer than the rutty track, and she essayed the turf.

"No, don't help me."

He stood off a little and watched her.

"Not too much adventure, Rachel."

She laughed.

"A lame dog's not much use in this new world. You have to be quick on your feet."

"There are a few lanes left."

"For old women! Do you know, I've made a discovery, man."

"Tell it."

"I've come to suspect that old people are not really old. They have young hearts in old bodies. They are just as much in love with life, and perhaps more so, but they can't quite go the pace."

"Yes, that's so. But youth——"

"Yes, I don't suppose youngsters realize."

"Youth never thinks of itself as growing old, or of the old potterers as having been young."

"But I do. I suppose I've been taught. Could anything be younger than mother?"

But the frozen turf of the lane soon tired her and she was ready to turn back.

"Take the old lady home."

Her little, whimsical laugh touched him. It made him realize how wise she was growing, and how exquisite the wisdom of her comradeship could be. Her touch had become delicate and subtle; the texture of her youth had the softness of an old, rich fabric.

He took her arm.

"You will have to tolerate—this."

She understood him.

"It's not so difficult," and she was wondering how any woman who had become friends with her intimate self could suffer the rude intimacies of some scrambling boy.

And on the new bridge of Monks Lacey they fell in with that type of boy, youth in a hurry, in too much of a hurry to understand anything, even its own raw self. They were in the middle of the bridge and in the middle of a seemingly deserted road when a two-seater car travelling at speed appeared on the straight

stretch behind them. It emitted squeals like some savage beast that had had its belly ripped with a knife.

Rachel seemed to stiffen. It was as though her paralysis suddenly had returned and pinned her helplessly in the middle of the road.

"I can't move, Nick. Make him stop."

Bonthorn swung round and raised an arm, and the car, slowing up with complaining brakes, stopped within two yards of them. A sullen, young face glowered, the face of a fair young man with high cheek-bones, and unpleasant, angry eyes.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Chapter Thirty-Two

I

RACHEL had said that her mother always would be young, and yet she had the eyes to see the changes that the last six months had wrought in Mrs. Binnie. Work, worry and that wicked winter had left their mark, and if Rachel welcomed the rising tide of her own power to do things, it was for Mrs. Binnie's sake as much as for Bonthorn's.

For, Robinia had aged very noticeably in those six months. She had a shrunken look, and both face and hair had become more bleached. She got out of breath more easily, and even her quick movements were a little more flurried and inco-ordinate.

She dropped things. She let the milk-jug crash in the middle of the kitchen floor, and stood regarding the white mess with an air of pained surprise.

"Well—really! What am I doing?"

Her memory began to play her little tricks. She kept some ready money locked up in an old oak bureau, and for years it had been her custom to secrete the key in some secret hole or corner, and from time to time she would change the key's hiding-place. Yes, in these days you never knew when motor-thieves might not descend upon you. But a day came when she forgot where she had hidden the key, and began to rummage for it.

"I can't think, my dear."

She stood by the window with her hands to her head.

"Now—where did I put that key? Isn't it silly? My head feels all muzzy."

Rachel, with a sudden protective glance at that little figure, rose from her chair, and took up the search.

"I'll find it. Sit down, dear."

Mrs. Binnie sat down with an air of slight bewilderment. She was annoyed with herself. What a head! And Rachel found the key in a half-empty matchbox on the mantelpiece.

"Here it is."

"Well, really! I must have forgotten."

At night, when sitting in front of the fire, she would begin to nod, and then fall asleep in the chair, her small body sagging over to one side, her mouth open. Sometimes she would wake up with a jerk, and look across at Rachel, and try to conceal the lapse. Asleep? O, no. But there were occasions when she herself realized that concealment was impossible. She would come to with a start, a catching of the breath, and a stiffening of her small body.

"Well, really—I must have dropped off! Isn't the room rather stuffy, Rachel?"

"Just a little, perhaps. But why shouldn't you have a nap? No need to be so hard to yourself, mumsie."

"My dear, I'm not an old woman yet."

But that was just what she was, a gallant little old creature, and so much the slave of her own courage that, like an old horse, she would fall asleep while trotting. Rachel's eyes were wise. She was realizing that this little body was very tired. It had never spared itself, and now it needed rest. She did not think of her mother as a candle that was flickering out, but as a lamp that needed oil. Her mother should be replenished.

Yes, if only she could hasten things, hurry her slack muscles back to strength, unglue her stiff joints. But it would happen, it must happen. Already, she was beginning to help in the house, and when her mother protested she smiled to herself and persisted.

"Now, you mustn't try to do too much, Rachie."

"It's lovely to do things, mother. It does me good."

Would she ever be able to do too much, to make her offering, her recompense? For mere restless, flitting youth was dead in her. She would not take all that was given and go her way to be young with some mate, while remaining perfunctorily kind to the pensioner. She had compassion, understanding, a passionate integrity. The impatient egotism of youth was dead. She could be loyal to both generations.

She spoke to Bonthorn of her mother.

"She has never spared herself. She's tired. Yes, she was ready to spoil us, and it's her turn to be spoilt. O, I must hurry."

He trod gently, delicately.

"Look here, get help. If it's a question of filthy lucre——"

But she put him off.

"No, we can manage. I don't think I want one of my cousins here. They have pale eyelashes. I'm getting Rhoda to look out for a woman. If your Martha hears of one——"

"I'll ask her."

"You see, this is a personal matter, Nick. I've got it in my heart and on my conscience."

"You would."

She understood too that he had magnanimity, the finer patience, a compassionate restraint. He was not the ruthless, greedy boy, clamouring to clutch her.

"Give me time, dear. But you will."

He spoke gently, thoughtfully: "The more you give to her—the more you'll get from me, dear. I don't know why, but you will."

If they conspired together it was in secret. There was to be no coercion, no suggestion of patronage, no "Mother, go to bed" touch. For Mrs. Binnie was so much Mrs. Binnie, and so full of the urge of Mrs. Binnie, that like a child at play she could not be interfered with. Why take her toys away, those very precious toys. In some matters she would have to be circumvented, but on soundless feet.

"I want to prevent her doing too much. For instance, the garden——"

For though that dreadful winter still endured, and March was January, Mrs. Binnie would go out, and potter and come in with half-frozen fingers. As a pragmatist she was incorrigible, but then her pragmatism had a core of mysticism.

And Bonthorn understood it.

"Let her potter, Rachel. She loves it. I'll try and see that she doesn't do too much."

Rachel nodded, and her eyes seemed to look at distant things.

"When the spring comes I ought to be able to manage. Though I suppose I shall always be a sort of slow-motion picture of myself. I must find the right sort of woman. But—I want her to feel that it is—her—show."

III

March prevaricated, or rather—it was the March of realism, dusty and dry and dead. The grass was as grey as a cloud. In the gardens there had been devastation, and Old Mischief could declare that he had never known such a winter, and perhaps he gloated a little, for the frost had found out the frailty of a number of those interlopers from abroad, plants with impossible names whom Old Mischief was tempted to regard as unwise virgins.

“That’ll larn they. Old Jack’s spoilt their virtue.”

Not till the thaw came and the sap began to rise would the extent of the ruin be known. Here were shrubs with cracked stems, and evergreens looking as though a fire had scorched them. The wallflowers were dead in the beds, and with them myosotis and polyanthus and violas. Bonthorn had lost every cistus he had, and the lithospermum which had covered two square yards of soil looked like a piece of old sacking. Buds remained sealed. Even the elder showed no sign of life. Never had March been so bitter, with a north-east wind blowing day after day.

Mrs. Binnie fretted a little.

“We’ll never get the garden ready for Easter.”

Crocuses in March. And a few narcissi spearing up in an attempt to be punctual. But March departed at last like a holy virago who had had her say and told the world just what she thought of it. The soil softened and accepted a spade, and Bonthorn came down and laboured. He was going to sow a plot of grass for Robinia, and stock her borders with such plants as he could spare. It would have to be a year of annuals, and Mrs. Binnie bought seed, mignonette, candytuft, nasturtium, larkspur, sweet sultan, virginia stock, marigold, clarkia, and godetia and love-in-a-mist. She began to be busy with a trowel. She was in too much of a hurry to sow her seeds, and Bonthorn had to preach patience.

“Wait till the soil has been warmed up a little and we have had some rain.”

In one corner by the shed a clump of daffodils for whom nobody had been responsible contrived to produce a dozen golden heads. Mrs. Binnie watched them open, and when the first yellow trumpet was blowing she picked it and took it in to Rachel.

"That's the first, my dear. I thought I'd like you to have it."

Rachel placed that solitary flower in a vase on her window-sill, and whenever she looked at it her eyes grew tender.

Meanwhile, she was becoming more sure of her legs and her future. She was working; she could walk as far as Yew End and back again without any sense of effort. Also, both she and Rhoda were searching for the unique woman who could float about among tables, and carry innumerable tea-trays and not lose her head or her temper.

Rhoda had heard of one such woman, but she would not be free till the end of April. Her name was Mary Bragg, but the surname was hyperbole. And Rhoda's baby was growing big in her, and Fred was becoming anxious and fussy. It—of course—would be a wonderful baby, because it would make Mrs. Binnie a grandmother, and she would be able to gloat over the infant without feeling herself so responsible.

III

It had been Mrs. Binnie's custom to take Rachel an early cup of tea, and Rachel was preparing to discourage this habit and to cease from breakfasting in bed, for, in the nature of things, Robinia was the person who should take her early tea in bed.

"I shall get up for breakfast, mother, next week."

"There's no need, my dear."

"But I want to."

It happened on a Sunday. That solitary daffodil was still alive on Rachel's window-sill, and the brightness of her blind suggested that the sun was shining. She glanced at her watch and found that it was ten minutes to eight, and on Sundays her early tea arrived at half-past seven. She could hear no one moving about the house, and she supposed that Mrs. Binnie had overslept herself, and she was of the opinion that her mother had every right to lie late in bed.

Her mother's bedroom was overhead and she lay and waited for the inevitable patter of feet. Mrs. Binnie would arise in haste, and with self accusations, come scurrying downstairs in her old pink dressing-gown to light the fire. But the silence continued, and Rachel began to be vaguely oppressed by it. Such inactivity was abnormal, even on a Sunday morning.

It disquieted her. She glanced again at her watch. Half-past eight. She sat up; she pushed back the clothes, and getting out of bed, thrust her feet into her slippers. A dressing-jacket hung from a hook on the door, and she put it on, and went out into the tea-room.

The room was just chairs and tables and streaks of early sunlight. It had prepared itself for the world on wheels, and on the previous day Mrs. Binnie had served seven teas. Rachel stood and gazed. She supposed from the look and the feel of the place that her mother was still in bed.

And then she heard a curious sound. It seemed to come from the kitchen. It puzzled her, and in her puzzlement was a tinge of fear. It was as though someone in the kitchen was trying to cry out, but could produce only sounds that were mere stifled, unintelligible noise.

The kitchen door was closed. She crossed the tea-room and opened that door, and for a moment she stood still. She saw her mother on the floor, half seated and half huddled against the sofa. Something had happened to Mrs. Binnie's face; one half of it had a flaccid look. One arm seemed tucked up. She mumbled.

But it was her mother's eyes that shocked Rachel. They looked up at her piteously. They were like the eyes of a child to whom something terrifying and strange had happened.

She was trying to speak. The other hand made groping gestures.

Rachel went down on her knees.

"Mother—what are you doing——?"

Mrs. Binnie mumbled at her, and her eyes grew more piteous.

Then Rachel understood, and if the inward soul of her uttered a cry of anguish it was to herself alone. She, who had been paralyzed, saw in her mother a little helpless creature in whom some cord had snapped. But in Rachel the strands of life seemed to vibrate and tighten. She touched her mother's face, stroked it, spoke.

"Lie quite still, darling. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Binnie's dragged mouth mumbled.

"I'll get help. Lie quite still."

She knew that she had not the strength to lift her mother, but going to her room she pulled off the warm bed-clothes and gather-

ing them in her arms, carried them into the kitchen. She wrapped them round her mother. She kissed her.

"Lie quite still, darling. I'll get help."

She hurried into her clothes, and while her fingers dealt with tapes and buttons, her heart cried out: "Mother—mother." But that little succouring presence lay there huddled and helpless. It was she who had to help.

She went out of the house and over the bridge and up the lane. It was an April morning; the sun shone, birds sang, and in their singing there was anguish—bitter-sweet. She came to Bonthorn's gate and passed in, and suddenly she saw him in the little white porch of the house, lighting a pipe.

His one eye met hers. She saw him take his pipe from between his lips, and drop the flickering match. He stood quite still for a moment. She called him.

"O, come, quickly. Mother——"

He seemed to be with her in one stride.

"Ill?"

"She's had a stroke or something. I found her lying in the kitchen."

He put an arm round her.

"Rachel—— Let me carry you."

But she was both soft and rigid.

"No, no—please—— It is with me now. You'll understand when—when you see her eyes."

IV

Bonthorn, on his knees, was conscious of nothing but those eyes.

"All right, mother, just keep still."

He was aware of Rachel speaking.

"In my bed. Not upstairs now."

He folded the bed-clothes round Mrs. Binnie, and lifting her, carried her across the empty tea-room to Rachel's room. And suddenly he remembered the little white dog with the broken back, and an indescribable spasm of emotion stirred in him.

Very carefully he laid Robinia in her daughter's bed.

"All right, mother."

Rachel was by him. She touched his arm.

"Yes—I'll see to her—now. Go up to Lignor."

Her lips seemed to move almost soundlessly, and Bonthorn understood. He went very softly out of the room and took the road to Lignor.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I

ON that same Sunday morning Rhoda's child was born, about an hour after Rachel's finding of her mother in the Mill House kitchen, and Bonthorn and Carver met on the doctor's doorstep. Carver had been up half the night, and he was tired and hungry, and if he was less pleased than he should have been at finding Bonthorn at his door that was the way of the world.

"Hallo—you don't want me, do you?"

"Mrs. Buck has had a stroke."

"What!"

"She can't speak, and one arm and leg——"

Carver opened his door.

"Well—I'm damned!—I've just seen her grandson come into the world. Bonthorn—I'm sorry. Come in a moment, will you? I haven't had any breakfast yet."

He put his midwifery bag on the hall table, and hung up his hat.

"Poor little Mrs. Binnie. Well, life's queer. I shouldn't have thought—but then she had overworked herself for years. That touches me, somehow, Bonthorn, and I'm a hard nut. I'll just get some breakfast and come straight down."

"What about the Tanrocks?"

"O, she had better not hear for a day or two. She has had rather a tough time. If you care to wait I'll drive you down."

"Thanks. I think I'll get straight back."

As he went down the road from Lignor Bonthorn saw the Lacey valley opening to him in the April sunlight. The Stella Lacey trees were throwing long shadows down the slopes. The river showed as little loops and dots of silver, and the Mill House itself, like a small grey box, sent up a thread of smoke. And Bonthorn felt sad with some of the gentle sadness of this English landscape in the spring of the year. Mrs. Binnie's silver cord was loosened. The hands of

that loveable and ridiculous little creature would serve no more teas or set no more plants in the soil.

Rachel was at the door. She had come out to hang up the notice that the Mill House wore on occasions: "Closed To-day." To Bonthorn she had a look of stricken calmness, but like her mother she would endure.

"Carver is coming directly. Strange, but your sister has just had her baby."

"Rhoda's baby. A boy?"

"Yes."

"I'll go and tell her. She understands."

But she paused in the doorway, as though she wished to share her sorrow with him.

"I want to be with her as much as I can. You see, she was frightened, terribly frightened. She couldn't tell me, but I knew."

He nodded.

"Shall I stay? I'm yours to do as you wish."

"Please."

"I can send Martha down."

"No—I can manage."

Her mother's phrase, and Bonthorn recognized it and was moved by it, and passing round the house he found himself in Mrs. Binnie's half-finished garden, and wondering whether it would be completed. But of course it would be completed. It had been both her last labour and her last play-box, and his eye fell upon a little base made of old red bricks. She had arranged them herself in the centre of the paving, her desire being to possess a sundial. "I must have a sundial—I must—really." Up at Yew End he had the barrel of an old stone roller that was to be trundled down and set up on the bricks as a pedestal. Yes, she should have her sundial though her gnomon might be in the shadow.

He heard Rachel's voice. She was at the kitchen window.

"Nicholas."

He turned to go to her.

"I've told her. She understood. She gave me a kind of smile with half her poor face. She was—pleased."

She put out her hand to him and he held it for a moment.

"Things happen—as they happen, Rachel."

"Not as we wish them to happen."

"O, yes, sometimes."

Then, Dr. Carver's car came down the road and she went to meet him at the door, and took him to the room that had been hers and was now her mother's. Mrs. Binnie might be an unusual little person, but her case was a text-book case, and the reading of it simplicity itself. She crinkled up half her small face at the doctor, and mumbled to him. And perhaps to no other patient had Carver ever been so gentle. As he had said to Bonthorn: "This touches me, and I'm a hard nut."

He spoke to Rachel in the kitchen. He told her that her mother had had an attack of cerebral hæmorrhage, that he thought she would survive it, but that she would never be the Mrs. Binnie of old. She might recover a part of her speech and some of the power in leg and arm, but he could not say how much. She would have to be kept in bed for some time and nursed very carefully.

He looked at Rachel with meaning.

"Almost like your own case. You will have to have a nurse in."

She sat silent and still by the window, watching Bonthorn walking in the half-finished garden.

She said: "I can manage. My mother managed. The district nurse will come in and help me."

He did not answer her at once. He seemed to stand and consider her and her inspiration.

"You are not quite strong enough yet."

And she smiled.

"Stronger than you think. There are things that make one strong. I can get a woman to help me in the house."

"You want to nurse your mother?"

She answered him with a steady, silent glance.

He understood her, and inwardly he applauded her. This was Mrs. Binnie revealed in her daughter, but if he was captured by her compassion, he was both man and physician. He opened the window and called to Bonthorn, but in Bonthorn he found no ally, but yet another conspirator.

"Bonthorn, as a friend—Rachel wants to nurse her mother. Now, a part of me approves—but is it quite wise?"

Bonthorn looked in through the window at the woman who some day was to be his wife.

"It's inevitable, like Rachel."

She flushed slightly, and gave him a quick, proud look.

"I'm not a fool, Dr. Carver. I don't rush at a thing I can't carry. Often she has made herself carry more than she ought to have borne. Would you call her a fool? O, yes, some people would. But—I——"

She paused for a moment, looking down.

"What I do I shall do—with my whole heart. O, yes, don't let's get sentimental about it. But this is so obvious, so lovely, so right."

It may have seemed to her that the two men slipped away as though such words should be left to sink silently like rain into the soil. Exquisite, simple language. But Bonthorn went round the house, and joined Carver by his car. They did not look into each other's eyes. Men don't when they are much moved.

Said Bonthorn: "I think it will be all right. I'll see she doesn't overdo things. I'm becoming a bit of a woman myself in some ways, and quite useful about the house."

Carver gave a little laugh, though laughter was far from him.

"Fancy anybody calling you an old woman. And yet, damn it—how silly! Those two women in there——"

"Exactly."

II

It took Rachel just fifteen minutes to find the key of her mother's bureau, and she found it at the bottom of a disused teapot in company with odds and ends of string and sealing-wax, a stumpy pencil and a packet of jam-labels.

She knew that the secrets of her mother's bureau would have to be invaded, and that for the future the finances of the Mill House would be in her hands. She sat down and went through Mrs. Binnie's account books and papers. There were a few letters which, when glanced at, she put hurriedly away. There were a few old photos, and two locks of hair in an envelope, and a piece from a wedding-veil wrapped up in tissue paper. She found her mother's pass-book; it had been made up about a month ago, and showed a credit of £33 7s. 1½d. She discovered £1 17s. 8d. in cash. And this, apparently, was the extent of their resources, for at the end of the dead season funds were low, and the summer trade was expected to replenish the exchequer.

Less than forty pounds, and the freehold value of the old house.

Well, there wasn't much margin. Her own long illness had narrowed that margin, and Mary Bragg would cost her more than a pound a week. But she would manage somehow.

And then Fred Tanrock arrived, with a smudge of sleeplessness and worry in his blue eyes, and found her at the bureau. He was more sensitive than he looked. He saw more than he appeared to see, but he could not put things into words.

"Awfully sorry, Rachel. Fancy it happening just when— No, I haven't told Rho yet. She's had a tough time, poor kid."

He sat on the edge of a table.

"Anything I can do? You'll want somebody."

"Mary Bragg is coming next week."

"But—till then?"

"Oh, I can manage."

His tired blue eyes looked at her doubtfully.

"But—you can't. You're not fit yet. If things had been different Rhoda would have come back for a month."

"Really, I can manage, Fred."

His glance went to the bureau.

"Looking into things, are you?"

"Yes."

"Any idea how you stand?"

"We have something in hand—and when the season starts—"

He got off the table and stood over her.

"You don't mean to say, Rachel, you are going to carry on everything; teas and nursing and all that?"

"Of course I am."

"But, my dear girl—!"

She folded up some papers and put them away.

"I'm stronger than you think, Fred. I shall only be doing what she did for me."

"But, look here, we're going to help. I know Rhoda will want to help. I'm doing pretty well, you know. I can let you have a quid a week."

"That's very good of you, Fred. If I should need it—I will tell you. That's a bargain."

She held out a hand to him.

"You're a comforting man to have around. You don't splurge, and work things up. When one's keeping a firm lip, it's easier—"

"O, that's all right, Rache. I mean what I say, but I'm not much good at saying it."

Meanwhile, it became plain to her that there were occasions when her mother would have to be left in the charge of a friend. She knew that it was necessary for her to interview the manager of the bank and certain of the shopkeepers. She wanted to see Rhoda and Rhoda's baby, and clinch matters with Mary Bragg, and when she put the problem to Bonthorn he found the solution easy.

"Well—I suppose I can deputize for an hour. I think Mrs. Binnie will accept me."

Obviously so.

"Fred will send a car, and I can get everything done in an hour or two."

"I'll sit with your mother. She understands things?"

"Yes."

"Well, explain to her. I don't think my being in and out will worry her."

When the matter was put to her, Mrs. Binnie smiled that crinkled, wry smile, and made a sign of assent with the hand that retained its power of movement. And Rachel went for Bonthorn and took him in. He sat down in a chair beside the bed.

"Rachel has to go out for an hour, mother. You won't quarrel with me, will you, if I come and read the paper to you?"

She put out a hand to him, and he sat holding it.

Tanrock drove Rachel up to Lignor, and she had her interview with the bank manager and discovered that Mrs. Binnie possessed a sum of £50 on deposit. The current account was in Mrs. Binnie's name, and if Mrs. Binnie could not sign cheques it might be necessary for Rachel to produce a power of attorney. She went on to various of the shops, and assured herself that there were no accounts outstanding, and it appeared that the Buck credit was gilt-edged. She made arrangements for the delivery of stores. There followed her visit to Rhoda and Rhoda's new house in Lignor's garden suburb. It was all very new to Rachel, and so was her sister's face, a little weary and somehow softened. And there was the baby—Master Frederick Francis Tanrock that was to be, all red and crinkled, with blue, blinking eyes.

Rhoda nursed the baby, while she and Rachel talked.

"Fred's spoken to you about the money?"

"It's very good of Fred. If I find that I'm pushed——"

"My dear—I want my share. When I heard the news—I felt like getting up and coming down. You've got everything on your shoulders, and you——"

Yes, Rhoda had softened. Her black brows were less fierce.

"O—I can manage, Rho. Isn't he lovely?"

"The precious little rascal. But he gave me a time of it, Rache. I'll forgive him."

"I bet you will."

"And I thought I was the last sort of woman who wanted a kid. Silly fool! Let me hold him, my dear."

Returning to the Mill House she saw Bonthorn walking in the garden. He had a book in his hand, and when she went to him he explained to her why he was in the garden and not at the post of duty.

"I read to her, and she fell asleep."

And with a smile he showed her the book: "Alice in Wonderland," and on the fly-leaf was written "Robinia on her tenth birthday—with Mother's love." She took the book from him, and for a moment her eyes were suffused.

"She fell asleep."

He nodded.

"And that's another title: 'Robinia in Dreamland.' I let her dream. Well—how have things gone?"

She kept the book in her hand, and told him all that she had done in Lignor. Rhoda's baby was—well, just the first baby and grotesquely attractive, and the financial situation was a little less cramped than it had seemed. Her mother's integrity was absolute. Mrs. Binnie, who, to the casual eye, might have appeared a feckless and muddled little person, had been meticulous in squaring her accounts.

"We owe the grocer five-and-sevenpence. She had paid up everything else. Marvellous."

She walked slowly over the paved space to the river, and seemed to muse a moment, and then came to stand by the little pile of red bricks that was to have supported pedestal and sundial. That it was incomplete was as significant as the incompleteness of the garden.

She said: "I don't know whether I can afford to finish this. At least—not yet. But somehow—I should like it finished, not because of the people who will come and sit here, and shout for more bread and butter and hot water."

"A matter of sentiment?"

Her dark eyes asked him: "Just what—is sentiment?"

But he had other realities to propound.

"Myself will do it. I've made various gardens in my time, but not one which has pleased me—as this one will."

"Man, that's very dear of you."

"O, nonsense. I'm utterly corrupt and prejudiced. I'll finish it in three weeks, and keep it in order."

"But your busy time is just coming."

He smiled as he produced for her one of the Mill House mottoes.

"I can manage."

Chapter Thirty-Four

I

ABOUT that time his London library dispatched to Bonthorn among other volumes a book on "Experimental Psychology," and Bonthorn, having sat up for two successive nights with the pedantic prig, shoved the fellow back in the book-box. Let him enjoy his jargon in secret. For, if the science of psychology is the study of human behaviour, Bonthorn had a little world of his own to observe, and he preferred the Mill House to the book.

For there it was not necessary to scrape the paint off the canvas, and having ruined the picture, declare with spectacles on nose that the artist's product was nothing but pigment applied to a sheet of cellulose. Nor was it necessary to get befogged in a complex, or draw a diagram of Mrs. Binnie, and stick pins into it, or worry about organic effects and conditioned reflexes. Let the new wisdom assert that Mrs. Binnie had no soul, and that she was a little sequence of reactions in the time-space scheme, but Bonthorn saw her otherwise. He was more interested in the living picture than in the hypothetical shreds to which the sedulously wise would reduce it.

If it was asserted that Rachel had no soul he could reply that he was watching the soul of Rachel unfold itself, like youth released from the chrysalis and spreading softly brilliant wings. Or, gardener that he was, he would have compared her to some flower of mystic growth. Her dark young dignity went to and fro before him. She would never move with the swiftness of her youth, and her slow, deliberate glide pleased him. She made him think—somehow—of a draped statue walking, but a statue that had colour, warmth, the compassion of the young priestess.

She could say to him: "I shall never dance again, but I can stand and walk and touch things."

The delicacy of her touch was manifest, especially in her fingering of flowers. It was as though things could be hurt. He was

aware—too—of what he called the tender tranquillity of her eyes.

Speaking of her mother she said to him: "We have just changed places, that's all."

For the season had arrived, and Bonthorn had completed Mrs. Binnie's garden, even to the sundial, and the chairs and tables were set out. Miss Mary Bragg had arrived, appearing each morning on a bicycle at eight o'clock. If Rachel set out to make the best of Mary she found in her certain superlatives. An angular woman with a pale and narrow face that clove consistently into the day's affairs, she was neither seductive nor a Winged Victory floating triumphantly with trays and teapots. But she served. No one could fluster her or make her lose her temper.

Mrs. Gloriana, returning from Italy, found Bonthorn involved in all those domesticities, a sort of doubled personality. Her gentle cynicism was mute. If in her more prejudiced days she had accused the Mill House of a certain promiscuity, she withdrew the accusation, and was gently ironical towards herself. She sent down boxes of bedding plants to the Mill House garden, and Bonthorn put them out.

She had questioned him about Robinia.

"Is there any hope for the poor little soul?"

Hope—indeed!

"She's just a child again. Her mentality——? O, well, in a way it's a rather happy state. She's always smiling, but sometimes she weeps just a little. She has only two words left her."

And to Bonthorn Mrs. Binnie's two words were strangely significant and touching, familiar relics. She said: "Well—really" to everything, to Rhoda's baby, when Dr. Carver teased her, when the sun shone, for yes and no. She could give those two words certain inflections. She could protest with them, express delight.

Every day Bonthorn would come down and carry her as he had carried Rachel, and sometimes she would pat his face.

"Well, really!"

An apt exclamation.

"Now then, mother, we want you out with us in the garden."

She liked being out of doors and very much in the midst of things. Propped up in Rachel's chair she lay and watched, sometimes nodding her head and smiling. She wished to be there when

the world on wheels poured in, and sat at the tables, and Mary Bragg hurried out with the tea-trays that Rachel passed through the kitchen window. And on Saturdays and Sundays Rhoda, not wholly Mrs. Frederick Tanrock, came down from Lignor to help, and Mrs. Binnie was put in charge of Master Frederick Francis. They got on famously together these two children, for Mrs. Binnie could make absurd noises which the infant seemed to understand. Or he slept placidly in Robinia's lap, while she surveyed him and all those activities which seemed to suggest to her that the little world of her creating endured and was good.

But, sometimes, there were tears. Almost daily Bonthorn brought her a bunch of flowers, and one morning after he had set her in her chair and given her the flowers to hold, he went away to do some job or other, and returning found her in tears.

"What is it, mother?"

The posy had rolled off her lap on to the stones, and she could not recover it.

"Well—really!"

He picked up the flowers and placed them into her hands, and almost instantly she was comforted. She put them to her face and then held them up for him to smell.

"Yes, lovely, mother, aren't they?"

So easily was she pleased.

II

Rachel's appeal to the world looked up and down the Lignor road.

"YE OLD MILL HOUSE

Have Tea by the River."

She had wondered whether that brand-new bridge and the broad sheet of tarmac would carry her custom past her doorway, but in the month of May she served more teas than during the corresponding month of the previous year. Saturdays and Sundays were as busy as ever, and Mrs. Binnie, sitting in her own particular corner under the shade of an elder tree, would sometimes play a game of her own contriving. She had on her table a

white jam-pot and a box of beans, and for every visitor she would take a bean from the box and drop it into the jam-jar.

She was pleased to see people. She understood their uses, and she would nod and smile at them, and sometimes the perfect gentleman would raise a hat to Mrs. Binnie. Others fell short of perfection, and on one occasion, Rhoda, sailing along with a tray, heard an untidy youth exclaim:

"Look at that funny old guy in the chair! She wants to get off with you, Bert."

Rhoda's sudden, flaming face presaged a storm, but Rhoda was not quite the old Rhoda. She swallowed something, and in refusing to let her soul flame like her face, she was the mother of Master Frederick Francis. Why let your wrath waste itself on some mop-headed fool?

III

Old Mischief had come to know that when the first flowering of some new hybrid was to be expected Mr. Bonthorn would be a little restless, for Nature could play you tricks, and Yew End had its disappointments. She would provoke Bonthorn to one of his fantastical moods. You never quite knew then what he would do or say, and even his sayings might be as puzzling as a rebus. Old Mischief could remember the first flowering of a particular plant, which, according to its parentage and all the colour factors, should have turned out an Egyptian blue, but had put forth petals of a dowdy puceness.

Bonthorn had stood and gazed at it almost malevolently.

"You abominable bastard."

Then, with an air of grave remorse he had raised his hat to the poor thing.

"Apologies. I withdraw that accusation."

A new hybrid iris had sent up its flower-spike, and the spearing green buds were about to open, and Old Mischief knew that Mr. Bonthorn visited the plant a dozen times a day. Almost he seemed as concerned as a husband over the labour of his wife and the perfection of their progeny. Old Mischief had a phrase to express this mood. He used it to Mrs. Martha.

"He's with flower."

Naturally, Mrs. Martha snubbed him.

But this bearded iris did not behave like the puce lady. She put forth a standard of exquisite lilac, and falls of a bluish-purple etched with cerise, and when Bonthorn had on several occasions taken his fill of gazing, he went into the garden-house and wrote a name on a white wood label. Mr. Osgood saw him plant that label in the ground, and the Old Mischief in him smiled.

"I know what be written on that."

Assuredly he would read on that slip of wood the name of "Rachel," but when, seizing his opportunity, he toddled up on his short legs, he found that his cunning had miscarried.

"Mrs. Binnie."

Well, wasn't that fantastical, to call a peach of a flower after a poor, paralyzed old woman!

But Mr. Osgood was yet more surprised when he saw Bonthorn cut that green and succulent flower-spike and walk off with it like an angel carrying a lily. Never had Old Mischief known him treat one of the new beauties with such ruthlessness. Almost, it was Bolshevism.

Bonthorn carried his standard down the lane, and into the Mill House kitchen where Rachel was making cakes. He looked for Mrs. Binnie, but Mary Bragg had put Robinia in her chair and wheeled her out into the garden.

Bonthorn displayed his treasure.

"I found a name for it at once," and he nodded in the direction of the garden.

Rachel's dark eyes smiled.

"Mrs. Binnie?"

"Could anything be better?"

He went out into the garden, and through the window Rachel watched him present the offering to her mother. She saw the spike of flowers reposing on Mrs. Binnie's breast and shoulder rather like a palm-branch, and she wondered whether her mother understood the inwardness of that act. Or was Mrs. Binnie just the child pleased with some beautiful, bright object? And, after all, did it matter?

IV

On the Friday before Whit Sunday the cycle was completed by the reappearance of Professor Prodgers and his red van. The

vehicle trundled over the new bridge, with its front wheels showing a distinct wobble, and diverging to the right without deigning to supply a signal, caused itself to be covered with curses by the driver of an express delivery van.

Mr. Prodgers did not protest against being called a sanguinary pirate. He had stopped his engine and got out and was observing the altered appearance of the Mill House, and being himself the victim of much newness, he gathered that progress had been at work. The tree had gone, and so had the posts and chains, and the chairs and tables, and the shady space that suggested that you should loiter.

"Poor Mrs. B: It comes to all of us. Pills, idle pills!"

The door stood open and he walked in, and found himself in the presence of a strange woman who was going about among the tables and polishing cups and saucers with a glass-cloth. She looked at him as though he too needed a little polish, which he did, and informed him that they did not open for teas until half-past three.

Mr. Prodgers said: "Quite so. And is Mrs. Buck still here?"

Mary, blowing some specks of dust out of the bottom of a cup, asked him a rather obvious question.

"Do you want to see Mrs. Buck? Because, if you do, she doesn't see people these days, not in the ordinary manner of speaking. She had a stroke three months ago."

Mr. Prodgers' round bun of a face looked a little crumpled.

"Had a stroke? I'm sorry for that."

"So's everybody. She just sits and makes noises."

"Does she. But there is a lot of conversation that might be included in the same category."

Miss Bragg eyed him as though she suspected him of waggery.

"You can see Miss Rachel. She's in the kitchen. But I expect we are going to be busy."

Rachel, hearing voices and coming to investigate, discovered that familiar figure and greeted it, but not as she would have greeted it a year ago. Possibly she was instantly aware of the little man's shabbiness, of something crumpled and old in him. His sallow plumpness was less polished, his eyes more sunken.

"Hallo. Mother will be pleased. You're just in time for tea."

Mr. Prodgers moistened his lips and suddenly looked pathetic.

"Not forgotten me? That's—that's fine. I could do with a good cup of tea."

Even his voice was a little more husky as though it was growing tired of shouting at the world and exhorting it to buy his pills, for the public was transcending Mr. Prodgers and his pills. The peasant mind was becoming penetrated by the Press, and a little red van on wheels was not sufficiently impressive. The public, if it proposed to be credulous, was minded to pin its faith to print.

Rachel took him through into the kitchen. Her mother was asleep in the long chair in a far corner of the garden, and when the infant was happily slumbering she could be left to her dreams. Moreover, Rachel had captured the impression that the professor was hungry, for her impressions about people were more swift and sensitive than of old.

She asked him: "Have you had any lunch?"

"Just a snack."

"You had better have something."

He did not refuse her offer, and if she had noticed a frayed and dirty shirt-cuff, she also had been sensitive to the little gleam in the eyes of the creature. She sat him down to a plate of pressed beef and ham and a salad, with a brown teapot all to himself, and she was soon wise as to his hunger. His knife and fork and his tongue were active together.

"Sorry to hear about your mother, my dear."

Rachel explained her mother's case to him. She told him nothing about herself and her six months in the wilderness. Her hands were busy while she talked, and when he had cleared up that first helping she gave him a second.

"I see you have had changes outside."

"Yes, they cut our frontage off. We had to adapt. One can adapt, you know."

The little man looked pensively into his tea-cup.

"Yes, that's so—when you're young. And where's Rhoda?"

"O, Rhoda and Fred are married. They have a baby. Mother thinks it the most wonderful baby that ever was."

"She would. That's her secret."

Presently he was replete, and produced a very old briar pipe with a much-charred bowl, and was given permission to smoke it, but he preferred to take it out into the garden, and there he came

upon Mr. Bonthorn putting asters and snapdragons into a bed. Bonthorn was on one knee, and very busy with the trowel, and for the moment he remained unaware of the imminence of Mr. Prodgers. But Mr. Prodgers recognized him, and reflected upon him. Was this yet another adaptation, and had the horticultural expert been compelled to undertake jobbing gardening? Or was the trowel the symbol of romance, if not the emblem of the new republic?

Mr. Prodgers addressed him.

"Nice rain last night, sir."

That was the right remark to make to a gardener, and Bonthorn, turning on his knee, looked up. He had a very good memory for personalities and faces, and the professor's figure fitted into a memorable picture.

"Yes, just the right sort of rain. So, you are down in Sussex again."

Mr. Prodgers sucked at his pipe.

"Yes, in a manner of speaking—I am, though it's not quite the old Sussex, sir. Tripods on the Downs, and the police not quite so—polite, and——"

He hesitated. Meanwhile Bonthorn remarked that a great amount of unnecessary fuss was being made about the steel pylons. Why quarrel with such improvisations when Brighton existed? Or Peacehaven?

The professor reflected, watching Bonthorn's trowel, and then he made a surprising remark.

"If I could plant pills on the public with a trowel, sir——"

He went on to explain that business was not what it was. As a little itinerant individualist he could not spend thousands of pounds upon advertising in the press or by poster, and so make use of mass suggestion, though his pills were as potent as any proprietary preparation on the market. "Everything gets into great chunks—these days, sir. You have to be stamped with a rubber stamp, brand this—or brand that. Tiptop Tea, or Shell Oil, or Soanso's Sardines. The world's getting too built-up and too official for poor old Uncle Remus. I shall have to get off the open road into some little burrow."

He crinkled up his broad nose.

"No use grouching. In my small way I'm like the South Wales

coalfield or cotton. Yes, my idea is to sell out and take a little shack on one of the nice new roads, and sell ginger-beer and petrol and cheap teas. I might even keep bees. I can't go on the dole. Well, it's no use grouching. There used to be a living in phrenology, but bumps aren't considered these days. No bumps on the road, and plenty of buffer to your car. I think I'll go and have a word with Mrs. Binnie."

Robinia was awake, and her face lit up when she recognized him.

"Well—really."

The professor purloined a chair and sat down beside her, and became talkative for both of them. He gathered that she understood him and found pleasure in listening to him. He became facetious, gallant, a little shabby creature who—in order to live—must laugh and especially so at himself.

"Yes, I'm thinking of retiring. Remember the Ten Commandments? Fact is, you know, Mrs. B., you and I ought to have settled down together. I could have turned my old bus into a trade van, and fetched your eggs and your bread and your groceries. But then, after all, I've only been a little old pirate on wheels, and pirates are out of date. You've got to be G.P.O. or L.G.O., or something. But don't forget I've made you the offer."

Mrs. Binnie laughed with him and at him.

"Well, really!"

And the exclamation was as apposite as ever.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I

It was a summer of drought, but the Mill House valley possessed the river and the greenness of its trees, and at the end of the long evenings when her mother had been put to bed Rachel would walk slowly up the lane to Yew End. Sometimes Bonthorn met her in the lane, and sometimes he would find her sitting under the cherry tree, Rollo in her lap, for she and the Cairn were sympathetic. The drought was making Bonthorn's day longer than hers, for she had to give drinks to casual people, but Bonthorn's garden had to drink or die. The Yew End tanks were fed by a ram and pipe from the stream, and in the cool of the evening Bonthorn and Old Mischief went to and fro with cans and gave the green things water. The old man had felt the heat of the summer, and Bonthorn had hired a strong lad to help, only to find that my lord had no intention of staying late to water. He wasn't such a fool, thank you. His day finished at half-past five, and at half-past five he departed regardless of parched plants and an old man's tired back, so at the end of a week Bonthorn sacked him.

At the close of the day and while waiting for her lover, Rachel would lie in the deck-chair and dream, but if her mind wandered it was conscious of things, the great beech tree, the tawny fields, a full moon rising, a blue-black sky, the ingratiating paw of a dog who remonstrated when she ceased to stroke his chin. She was not impatient with her lover because he loitered. In becoming friends with her own body she had ceased from impatience. For that was how she described it to herself: "I'm friends again with myself." It was as though she had lost her body and recovered it and slipped with a shiver of ecstasy into the warm sheath. And if life was a little delicate and deliberate she had time to feel things with her body, to walk with it and gaze with it, and touch and smell. She had ceased somehow from being the little, fussy objective creature pulling a flower to pieces and finding nothing

there. A beautiful subjectivity made her flesh of the world's flesh. She could not say why life had become so smooth and good, or why she found a pleasure in doing things, or why everything had rhythm. She could say that she lived, and that living and loving sufficed her.

Bonthorn came down from the gate in the thorn hedge. He was in his shirt-sleeves, coat over arm, and in the cool dusk she still seemed to hear the splashing of water.

She looked up at him.

"Tired, Nick?"

He bent down and kissed her.

"Good tiredness. I've done the job. Martha's bringing out some tea."

He picked up the Cairn, and held the dog's little brown face an inch from his own.

"Hallo, young fellow, a lot of work you do."

"But aren't they lovely—just because they don't?"

"Animals?"

"Yes."

"All play and no work, or all work and no play. My lad, you missed Eden. Good old Adam."

He put Rollo back in her lap, and felt for the pipe in his pocket, and suddenly he laughed.

"The thing is to stop asking too many questions. Here's the moon in her silver slippers. Had a good day?"

She stroked the dog, and watched her lover.

"Isn't that a question?"

"Palpably. Ask me another."

"No, I don't want to ask questions. I feel I'm just lying in a kind of cradle made of shadows, and everything's smooth and good."

He sat down beside her on the grass.

"Feeling part of life, what, part of things, in them—instead of rushing about outside and round them. Yes, that's it."

Martha brought their tea, and the obduracy of Martha had stooped to other conquests and surrenders. If she had served Mr. Bonthorn for seven years, and was a jealous spirit about the house, she could transcend her limitations. Here was a virgin somehow wise, and if Mr. Bonthorn must get married—well—there would

be something romantic about it, for in the orderly chest of drawers that was herself where everything lay neatly starched and folded, Martha kept a little sachet of sentiment. She had heard those two rambling over the cottage, and the intimate interplay of their voices: "So, you would like this room for yours?"—"No, I won't turn you out."—"But I shall be just as untidy in the one across the passage." And Martha had exclaimed to herself after the fashion of Mrs. Binnie: "Well, really; a room each!" For to Martha this was a new reflection upon marriage, though she was persuaded to approve of it. Was there any woman who would not prefer to keep her things and some part of herself nicely laid aside where a man did not come and rummage for socks and collars? Meanwhile, Martha was preparing to give notice. Another woman about the house was not part of her philosophy. And yet the ultimatum dallied.

Bonthorn, squatting on the grass like a boy, was somehow wise as to Martha's shadowy otherness.

"Tea at ten o'clock. Martha always spoils me."

Rachel put the dog aside and sat up.

"Shall I pour out, Martha, or will you?"

Her voice was like a soft and tentative touch, and Martha remained mistress of the teapot.

"Sugar?"

"Please."

Yes, life was a fantastic business! Fancy—her—pouring out tea for one of the Buck young women! But then, a girl who stuck to her mother and her job in these degenerate days! She gripped the milk-jug firmly.

"There won't be too much of this. The cat's had his saucer."

That was final.

"I'll have mine without milk, Martha."

"There's enough, sir—if it's handled properly."

Rollo was to feel her authority. Her squareness bent and gathered him up.

"You come to bed, young man."

And she walked off into the darkness with the dog.

If Rachel had qualms about Martha she had no desire to air them on this summer night, but it was Bonthorn who touched upon the problem of Martha.

"You see, she has been here seven years. She's a good soul. And after all—it is easier to manage the people who want to manage."

"Just how?"

"Why, let them manage—to a point. Besides, after all, service is one of the most precious commodities. The Victorians got it cheap, and didn't value it."

She was looking up through the foliage of the cherry.

"Yes, the woman's job, Nick. And woman is in revolt against it, or is supposed to be. The eternal washing-up, keeping things clean. And yet I suppose one might get just as bored pressing a button or pulling a lever, and having all your music made for you, and listening to little talks by Uncle Remus. If Martha will stay with us——"

"You'll bear with her?"

"O, yes. Besides, isn't it rather rotten—this idea of always going on strike when life leaves something on your doorstep? Mother never went on strike."

He sipped his tea.

"I'm going to be sententious. We get what we give."

The moonlight was touching her knees when the Stella Lacey clock struck the half-hour. She made a movement as though to rise, and then sat still with her elbow resting on her lover's shoulder. She was very near to him, and yet apart, thinking her own thoughts, and letting herself be surprised by them. She knew that a year ago the prospect of living here in this green corner would have frightened her. Finality, boredom, surrendering to someone, being always with the same man. A house——! She had loathed the idea of a house of her own, the messy muddle of marriage, a sort of intimate slavery. She had wanted to cut that out, to be herself, to travel, to be both irresponsible and independent. All the old sentimental stuff about a home and a husband and a baby! No: plenty of fun, plenty of movement, with no one to hand you a time-table. That had been her ideal.

But she was so much older since she had got back into her body and become friends with it. Life seemed smooth and rich and deep. She got right into things and snuggled up in them.

She drew her arm softly across Bonthorn's shoulder.

"But you can't be yourself by being nothing but yourself."

He caught her hand as it trailed.

"You smooth, wise thing."

"Perhaps. Time to go. Must see she's all right."

He went with her down the lane to the Mill House. That she slept alone there with no one in the house but Mrs. Binnie sometimes troubled him a little, and he would go and sit in the garden until her window grew dark. She had the key with her, and she opened the door, and he followed her in. A candlestick had been left on one of the tables, and she struck a match and lit the candle.

Bonthorn waited while she went to the door of her mother's room, and opened it very gently, and looked in. Her motionless and listening figure seemed part of the stillness of the house. The flame of the candle flickered, and the shadows moved with it.

She closed the door and came back to him.

"Asleep."

They spoke in whispers, standing close with the candle between them.

"I'm always a little afraid, Nick, of that door. Coming back—and wondering——".

"Dear."

"Some day—— O, yes, you understand. She wants me—and I want her. Yes, and you. That's instinct—I suppose. A woman wants to be wanted. All the rest is second-best—somehow, just make-believe."

She stood in the doorway with him for a moment, and the sharp, vibrant notes of the Stella Lacey clock came down the valley. And suddenly she smiled.

"Eleven. One more than the ten commandments! Do you remember——? O, but you weren't here. You came in afterwards. But you must go now, Nick, you're tired."

Some impulse made him pass a finger through the flame of the candle.

"I haven't moth wings. There's something for you to think about. Good night."

Chapter Thirty-Six

I

RACHEL grew stronger.

Before the summer had passed she was able to lift her mother in and out of bed, and Mrs. Binnie allowed herself to be so lifted. For, if Robinia had an eye and a soul for the miraculous, and a vocabulary of two words with which to express herself, she could be something of an enigma even to her daughter. There were times when she would lie and watch Rachel, and look pathetic as though she had something to say that could not be said. As Carver had prophesied, she had her moods, her emotional moments, her infantile whims, but never did she arrive at the naughtiness of the child. She had been given a little hand-bell to ring when she wanted anything, but the tinkle of that bell was rarely heard. She spent most of her time lying like a very young child, watching things, but without showing any desire to touch or to hold.

There were times when Rachel wondered what was passing behind the half-closed shutters of that silent self. Sometimes it troubled her. Sometimes it made her afraid. How much did her mother feel? Did she think, and if so—of what? Were there gaps in that consciousness, voids that remained unfilled, little human hungers that could not be satisfied? Did her mother feel lonely, frightened? And often, in moments of troubled tenderness she would leave her work, and go and sit by Mrs. Binnie as though to let her live presence flow in and fill any silent and empty crevice.

Was there something her mother wanted?

One day in the garden Mrs. Binnie kept making signs with one hand. Her fingers suggested scribbling movements on the table beside her.

"What is it, mumsie? You want to write?"

Robinia nodded her head.

Rachel brought her a writing-pad and a pencil, and she under-

stood at once that Mrs. Binnie had got what she wanted. The pad was arranged on Robinia's lap, and she began to make tentative dabs at it with the pencil. Meanwhile, Rachel was called away by Mary to interview the grocer's roundsman who had arrived minus the week's baking-powder. She dealt with him and his prevarications, and returning later to the flowery corner where her mother lay, she saw Mrs. Binnie holding up the pad.

"Something for me to read?"

Mrs. Binnie gave two jerks of the head, and Rachel took the writing-pad and saw scrawled on it in shaky capitals one poignant sentence:

"I DON'T WANT TO BE A TIRESOME OLD WOMAN."

For a moment Rachel felt like hiding her face behind the pad. She was shocked, touched, challenged. Was this an accusation of failure, or had the light that was Mrs. Binnie given one of its characteristic flickers? But the sudden emotional impulse prompted her. She took the pencil from her mother's hand, and with a kind of fierceness printed with black emphasis her large answer on the page. She dashed in three emphatic, heavy lines below it:

"YOU NEVER WILL BE."

She showed it to her mother, and then tore the sheet off and folded it up, and slipped it between throat and dress.

"Never, do you understand?"

Mrs. Binnie, understanding that she had hurt her daughter, put up a hand. She stroked Rachel's face, and then again possessed herself of the writing-pad and pencil. She made it plain that she had other words to plant upon the page. She gave Rachel a gentle push with her hand. It said: "Go away, but come back. This is a solemn business."

Rachel left her. She did not go into the house, for this was one of those moments when she did not wish to meet the eyes of any other human creature. She walked up the lane as far as Bonthorn's gate in the holly hedge, and returning, stood on the new bridge, and looked at the river.

But when she returned to her mother she discovered something almost gaillard and coquettish in Mrs. Binnie's expression. The writing-pad was held out to her, and Rachel read her mother's eleventh commandment printed in crude capitals:

"I WANT YOU AND B. MARRIED."

Just that.

II

It was not merely to please Mrs. Binnie that Bonthorn and Rachel became one flesh. They did it partly to please themselves, and quietly so in the parish church of Lignor, and returning to her who had instigated the deed, stood one on either side of Robinia's chair.

"We have done it, mother."

Mrs. Binnie's "Well—really" had the triumphant quality of the Wedding March, and then—as was natural—she wept a little, and had to be made much of. But her Niobe mood was transient. She made them understand that she wished to share in the ritual of some celebration, and that the scent of orange blossom mattered. For, with Rhoda and her husband arriving, Mrs. Binnie made secret signs to Fred, and finding him collusive she scribbled on her writing-pad: "Champagne."

Which, after all, was not a pagan gesture, but somehow reminiscent of the Marriage at Cana, and Fred got into his car and driving to the wine-merchant's at Lignor, returned with the precious bottle. It was opened in Mrs. Binnie's presence, and all four of them stood round her and performed the sacrament.

Afterwards, it was noticed that Mrs. Binnie folded her hands over her bosom, closed her eyes, and went to sleep with such a look of serenity and satisfaction on her small face that Rachel made signs to the others. "She's tired." And they faded away, but to Rachel her mother's tiredness was a folding of wings. Something hovered there above her on invisible pinions, the white bird with no spot of blood upon it, a thing of exquisite sadness and joy, the transfiguration of an instinct.

She touched her husband's arm.

"It has made her happy—somehow."

III

Yet, though their mystic flesh was one, their workaday selves remained apart, and the world might comment on a marriage that was so singularly situated. Bonthorn cultivated his garden, and dispatched plants to various purchasers, while his wife continued to serve teas and play nurse to her mother.

For, that which had been a perfunctory affair, had become of interest to Rachel, this little world of her own in which she functioned. It was her mother's show, and hers, and becoming so much hers that she liked the handling of it, the planning and ordering, the nice balance of supply and demand, the sublimated sense of adventure. She had begun by saying to herself: "So long as she lives I'll keep her and myself," only to find that she was a little in love with her half-world and its independence. But not aggressively so. It gave her a sense of poise, of somehow adding to the common store, of giving and getting. She found herself less conscious of that which she might have called drudgery, and more aware of the nice fashioning of detail. She liked to calculate and to contrive, and to feel the little pull of the day's problem.

"How many people to-day? I've budgeted for fifty," and when the day gave her forty-eight she felt that she had her crossword puzzle nicely squared.

The Mill House was paying. She had to hire extra help, and a bright young thing with a pleasant smile fluttered about among the tables. Even her account-book fascinated her. She balanced it weekly, and would show it to Bonthorn with an air of whimsical gravity.

"It's becoming quite a good property, Nick."

Possibly he should have been jealous of her job, and yet he wasn't. He did not say to her: "A woman's duty lies at home," and if they had two homes—the strangeness of it somehow amused him. Moreover, while being somewhat apart they seemed more together and she was his while being herself.

And one day she asked him that question.

"You are not jealous of my job, Nick?"

"Not yet."

"I'll give it up—if you——"

"If something should happen?"

"Yes, if something should happen."

But she had a little more cunning of the serpent in her than had her husband. She knew what it was to be on the edge of things, and that while Bonthorn might talk about beauty, beauty and two-pence three farthings do not harmonize. He created new flowers, largely for the love of them, while she—the daughter of her mother, did things for money. Her school of economics had been founded upon necessity; it was neither academic nor humanistic; it was personal.

Bred in an England that was growing poorer while pretending to be richer she had the younger generation's urge towards economics. Money mattered, and supremely so, but unlike the mass of her contemporaries she was ready to earn her money. She liked the feel of those shillings, the blossoming of her balance at the bank. Yew End could be beauty, the Mill House business. In passing from one to the other she satisfied the two persons in her self, that which gave and that which got.

For Martha continued manageful at Yew End, and refrained from giving notice, and Martha was an asset.

So, Rachel, sometimes seeing her man as the beloved boy playing a game that would never be played for money, was content that it should be so, while keeping a finger on the thread of reality. He had but one eye, she—two. He was the most un-economic person imaginable, while she could play at profit and loss in the interludes between her dreams. She had her idea.

She put it to him one day.

"Nick, why shouldn't the Mill House—continue?"

He was tying up bundles of plants, and for the life of her—though she concealed the truth fiercely, she knew that she would never be interested in plants. He straightened his back, and sometimes it was a rather tired back.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, the Mill House is only a summer show, but it may bring us in three hundred a year. We could shut it up in the winter. And part of the winter is your slack time."

"A lot of work for you. Do you think——?"

Her idea spread its petals.

"I rather like it—Nick. It's my share in the show. It would help to pay for extra labour—if you want it."

Her smile was whimsical.

"And what about yourself?"

She met his smile and answered it.

"O, yes. We might go abroad for a month or two in the winter.

I do admit that I'd like——"

He went on working at his plants, and his face was grave.

"See things? Well, why not? Italy, Africa, Spain. The English winter can be pretty unintelligent. Sun. But you'll be paying."

She watched his hands.

"Would that hurt you, Nick, or offend you?"

His smile came back.

"Man—the master. That's an obsolete notion."

But she snuggled up against him.

"No, not really. Besides—it's rather delightful to play at making plans, and all my plans might—well—just melt."

He looked at her for a moment as though asking himself the question: "Are you wax or steel?" And then he knew that she was neither, and that he wished her to be neither a cloying sweetness nor the little autocrat in the home. But she would always be more wax than steel.

He laughed.

BONTHORN & BONTHORN

Horticulturists and Caterers.

"But my other job's more permanent, Nick."

"What's that?"

"The job of being your wife!"

He stared very hard at something, and then he kissed her.

"Now, according to our contemporaries—this should be irony. But—somehow—I think it is not."

Money.

Sometimes, when pouring the silver, and especially the Sunday silver, into the cash-box and hiding the cash-box at the bottom of a drawer, Rachel had a vision of her mother's hands busily gathering up pieces of silver. Anxiously, devotedly, but never with miserliness Mrs. Binnie's hands had collected pieces of silver through the years.

What were her mother's views upon the whole competitive show as it concerned woman? It occurred to Rachel that her mother must have gathered views, or rather secret prejudices and urges, little intuitive yearnings that had been suppressed. But what could her mother express? She sat and watched life like a little old child, and you might infer that her impressions were the impressions of a child.

Yet, on occasions, even in the rush of Sunday serving, Rachel would find her mother's eyes watching her, two small points of light, or slits of mystery, for there was a veil of mystery about Mrs. Binnie. It was possible to wonder whether she saw more than she seemed to see, that she was aware of things below the surface of your secret consciousness. A little, voiceless, watchful creature, less childlike than she appeared.

Occasionally, Rachel saw Mrs. Binnie scribbling on her writing-pad. She had become more expert in the printing of capitals. And Rachel was to remember that autumn evening when in a kind golden dusk she went to wheel her mother in, and found Robinia sitting up more straight than usual. She had something in her hand, an envelope, and with an air almost of gentle severity she showed it to her daughter.

And Rachel read:

"RACHEL. TO BE OPENED WHEN I AM DEAD"

iv

It happened less than a week after the incident of the closed envelope.

It was Monday, and one of those misty mornings in October when the tops of the willows are like little yellow flames, with the trunks below still shrouded in vapour. Grass and hedges were drenched with dew.

It was Rachel's custom to go to her mother's room directly she came downstairs. The door was left ajar, and the little hand-bell placed on the table beside the bed. Usually, Mrs. Binnie would be awake, and ready to welcome Rachel with the flutter of a hand, but on this October morning there was a stillness.

"Mother——"

In the half-light she touched a hand lying outside the bed-

clothes. It was cold, and the sudden chill of that contact seemed to rush to her heart. She bent down and put her face close to the face on the pillow, and no breath touched her cheek.

She understood. With a sense of infinite loss and of dry anguish she went to the window, drew back the curtains and raised the blind, and stood looking at that little figure that made a narrow, white crease in the bed. Yes, light. A small, serene face sunk in the hollow of the pillow. Her hand touched the blind-cord, but no, why shut out the light? Mrs. Binnie did not belong to the darkness.

She went and knelt for a little while beside the bed, and rising she noticed the table with the bell upon it, and beside the bell her mother's Bible. A white edge protruded. She picked up the Bible, and opening it, found the envelope between the leaves.

"RACHEL. TO BE OPENED WHEN I AM DEAD."

She walked to the window with the envelope in her hands. Before opening it she looked at the misty trees with their tops in the sunlight. She unfolded the sheet of paper and read:

"RACHEL—DEAR

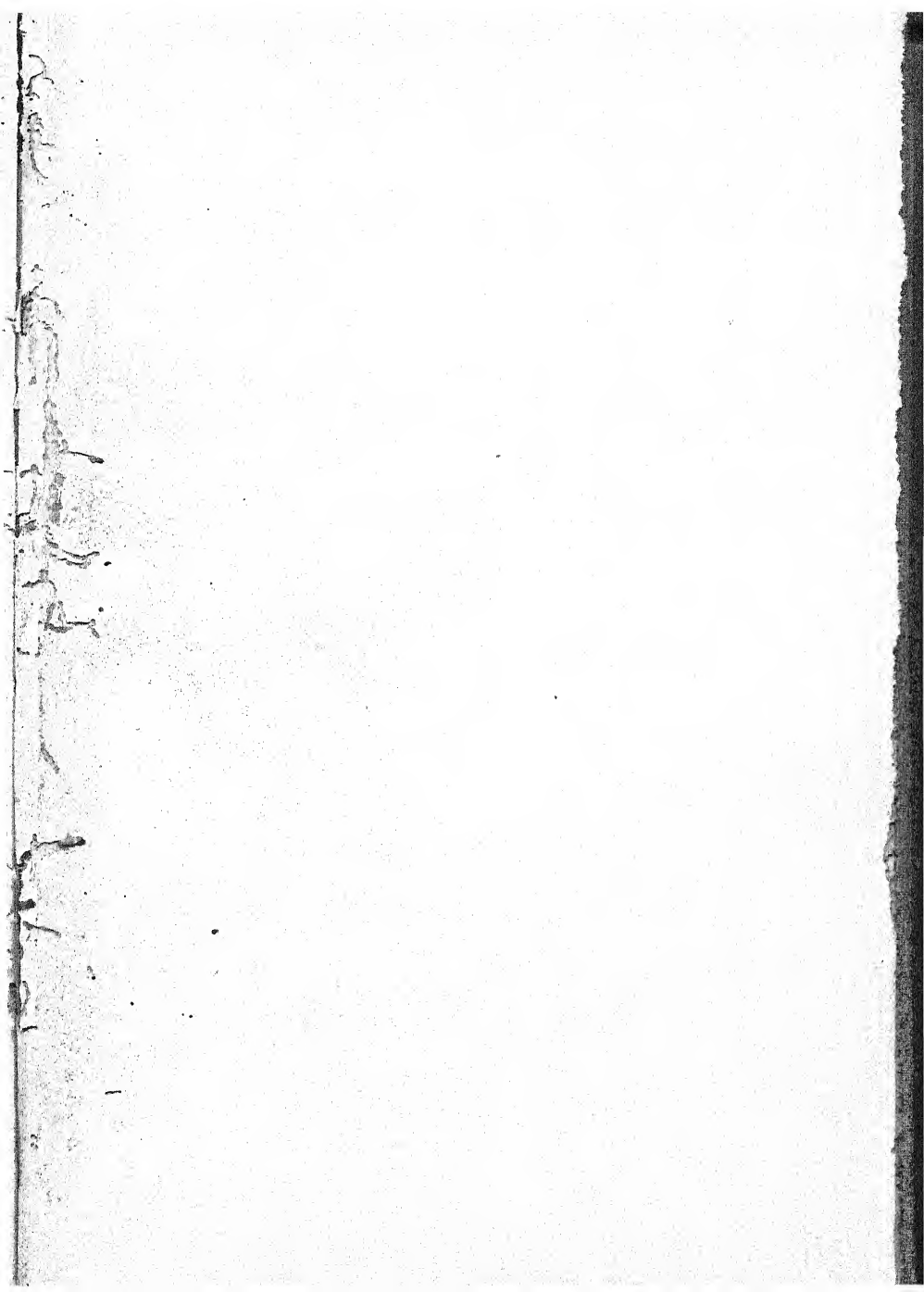
SELL THE MILL HOUSE AND GO TO YOUR HUSBAND."

She folded up the sheet, and stood looking intently and with a kind of sorrowful fearfulness at the face upon the pillow. Her mother's last commandment! And going out into the dew-wet lane she walked between the brilliant hedges to Yew End.

She found Bonthorn in the garden, and instantly he seemed to know that the end had come. Her face and eyes were both tremulous and calm. She gave him the sheet of paper.

He read the words, and with lowered head, stood waiting before her.

She said: "It is finished. She was wiser than I knew."



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WARWICK DEEPING

alone among the present day writers, has captured the public's imagination by a deep belief in the basic qualities of human nature. He himself has written: "I believe in the large simplicities, in the human urges at the back of all of us. I believe in love, courage, and compassion. I suppose that is why the people who are out first after cleverness fail to see that life is a complex of the great simplicities. We are apt to look at little bits of the pattern, and not at the whole garment." Herein, perhaps, may be found the secret of Mr. Deeping's success—a success that has grown steadily from the publication of Sorrell and Son in 1926.

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